

38

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

INVADERS
OF THE JORMA
ROKURO!?



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INVADERS
OF THE JUM
ROKURO!?



“WANT TO
SEE MY TAN
LINE?”

“COME HERE,
KOUTAROU.”

“HMM?
WHAT FOR?”



A large, blue and grey humanoid mobile weapon, Warlord III, is shown in a hangar. It has a helmet with a visor and a sword-like weapon on its back.

**WARLORD III
WAS THE HUMANOID
MOBILE WEAPON ELEXIS
HAD ONCE USED WITH
GREAT EFFICIENCY
AGAINST KOUTAROU-
AND IT WAS NOW
SITTING IN THE HAZY
MOON'S HANGAR.**

A young man with brown hair and a young woman with blue hair are standing in a hangar. The man is wearing a blue and white suit, and the woman is wearing a white and blue uniform.

**"I NEVER
DID EITHER."**

**"I NEVER
THOUGHT I'D
BE USING
THIS..."**

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FACTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House.

Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS
(OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)



SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106.

Also the Blue Knight.



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.

**KOUTAROU'S
CHILDHOOD FRIENDS**





AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.

MAGICAL GIRLS

(OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAЕ

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.

GHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.

CLARIOSSA

DAORA FORTHORTHE

Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.



PRINCESS ALAIA



NALFA LAREN

A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...



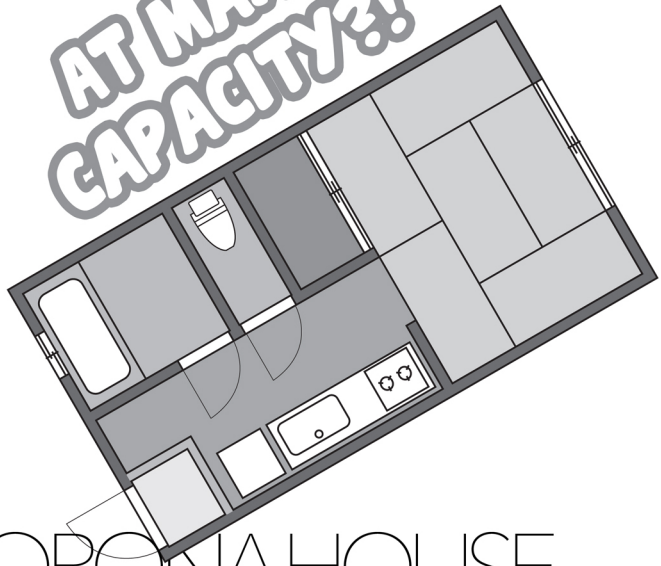
SAKURABA HARUMI

The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.

ALIENS

(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

AT MAX
CAPACITY?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

The Girl Who Fell From the Sky

Wednesday, August 10th

Koutarou and the girls were now back at Corona House after their beach trip, and even though it had been days, they were still fondly reminiscing about it. It was an eventful and memorable vacation for everyone.

“Come here, Koutarou.” Theia beckoned him with her right hand as she hooked her left index finger around the collar of her shirt.

“Hmm? What for?” he asked, looking up from his homework. Theia was sitting across the tea table from him, and he couldn’t help noting the grin on her face.

“Want to see my tan line?” she asked.

Indeed, Theia had picked up a tan under the summer sun at the beach. The skin underneath where her swimsuit had been, however, was still perfectly pale. The contrast was so amusing that she wanted to show Koutarou.

“Cut it out,” he replied. “I’m not answering an impossible question like that.”

Her offer had him a bit unnerved. If he said that he *did* want to see, he’d basically be asking her to take her clothes off. And if he said he *didn’t* want to see, he’d basically be acting like he had no interest in her. It was a dangerous conundrum.

“Ohoho, that was the right answer.”

Koutarou had responded exactly the way Theia’d hoped. Essentially, she just wanted to tease him. She would have been pleased with whatever result as long as it forced Koutarou to look at her and see her as a woman.

“Come on...” he complained.

But in spite of himself, Koutarou understood Theia’s motivations. He wasn’t going to have an easy time picking one girl over the other eight. They’d all risked their lives to show him how they felt, each girl believing they could support one another. Rejecting even one of them would be incredibly painful. Koutarou didn’t think he’d be able to go through with it.

“You could stand to be a bit more cavalier when it comes to simply beholding my body,” Theia scolded him.

“I don’t want to be cavalier.”

Koutarou didn’t think he could reject any of the girls, but that

didn't mean that he could accept all nine of them as girlfriends. It just wasn't the right way to repay the girls who'd staked everything on him. This was the dilemma of finding himself with nine different people precious to him. It was why he'd even entertained the idea of maintaining the status quo. He thought he would be happy just seeing the girls happy.

"Then continue as you are until you're satisfied. This, too, is a part of you I love. That's just how my knight is, and it's why I'll wait for you forever. The same goes for the other eight girls."

"Sorry for being so stubborn..."

"You can say that again." Theia let go of her collar and laughed. "Hahaha!"

As she did, another laugh came from nearby. "Ahahaha!" This one was from Kotori, who was watching from across the room.

"Kotori?" Nalfa looked up at her friend in puzzlement. The two of them, like Koutarou, were working on their homework.

"I was just thinking how true to form this is for Kou-niisan. Way back when, he'd joke about wishing for a girlfriend. But now that he's got his chance, he doesn't know what to do with it."

Koutarou had always wanted a girlfriend, but he'd never dreamed of actually having one. He figured that it would never happen, or that it wouldn't work out if it did. Seeing his expectations turned completely on their head, Kotori couldn't help but laugh. In truth, it was a huge relief to her. She'd been worried about him for some time.

"And the beach?" Nalfa asked. "Was that also because that's just the kind of person he is?"

"I thought it was strange that he would throw you like that, Nalchan. He must have been *trying* to make me angry."

Unlike Kenji, Koutarou didn't have a lot of experience with girls, so even his best attempt at throwing a surprise party had been somewhat clumsy. Fundamentally, that was the same problem he was having now.

"Hmph." Unaware of the younger girls' quiet conversation, Theia crawled over next to Koutarou and sat down next to him. She then leaned against him to read some manga. "This is acceptable, is it not?"

"I guess."

"And it would be nice if you'd wrap your arm around my waist."

"I guess that's okay too..."

"You never would've agreed to that a year ago, you know?"

"Well, you risked your life for me. So easily too. It'd be weird if I didn't pay you back somehow."

There, Koutarou put down his pen and pressed his finger to Theia's forehead. Though he couldn't see it right now, he was thinking of the red crest engraved there. Given what she'd been willing to

sacrifice for him, the ever-serious Koutarou couldn't just do *nothing* for her.

"Whether it was an easy or complicated affair is a matter of perspective," Theia insisted.

"Yeah. That's exactly the problem," Koutarou sighed.

"Hahaha."

"What?"

"It's nothing."

Theia set her manga down on the table and began stroking Koutarou's arm around her waist. After some time in silence, she took his left hand with her right and intertwined their fingers. She then picked up her manga again with her left hand.

"Won't that be hard to read like that?" he asked.

"Indeed. Just flipping the page is a challenge," she replied.

"Then just read it normally."

"I'd like this to be normal."

"I see..."

"Good."

"...You know, your scalp got a tan too."

"That's a blatant change of topic."

Theia started reading her manga again with only one hand, but she was up to the challenge.

Since it was the middle of the summer vacation, the Corona House crew filtered into room 106 at different times of day. Kiriha didn't return until four in the afternoon. By then, Koutarou had reached his homework goal for the day and was reading manga with Theia.

"What an overly complicated way to read a book," she remarked.

Koutarou and Theia were holding hands, so they were each only using a single hand to read. At a glance, the setup looked remarkably inconvenient.

"See? Even Kiriha-san thinks so," said Koutarou.

"Surely you've gotten used to it by now. Don't be mean," Theia replied.

"Well, it's good to see the two of you getting along so well," Kiriha giggled.

Thanks to Koutarou and Theia's conversation, she now had a fairly good handle on the situation and entered the room still giggling. She took a seat at the table for herself and began making some tea.

"It sounded like today's meeting would be a heated one," Theia said, stopping what she was doing.

Kiriha shook her head as she steeped the leaves in the pot. The gesture betrayed her exasperation. "Indeed, such conferences are always busy ones," she sighed.

“There’s the new transfer students in the fall, Ralgwin’s forces, and now Grevanas. There’s a lot on the table, not to mention the fact that everyone else comes to Kiriha-san when they have problems,” Koutarou added.

“If you understand that, go give her a shoulder rub or something.”

“Let go of my hand, then.”

“Hmmmmmm...”

Theia reluctantly released Koutarou’s hand. She then went back to reading her manga, this time with both hands, but ultimately closed the book and put it down on the table.

“Kiriha-san, what kind of massage would you like?”

“Let’s see... My shoulders would be lovely.”

“You got it.”

Koutarou moved behind Kiriha. There was nothing wrong with giving a friend a little massage. Kiriha was fully dressed and everything, so Koutarou had no reservations about it. But being bashful was the last thing on his mind once he put his hands on Kiriha’s back.

“Hmm? What’s this...?”

“What is it, Satomi Koutarou?”

“You can’t wait until it gets this bad, Kiriha-san.”

Koutarou was talking about the tension in Kiriha’s shoulders. While he wasn’t as good as Sanae, he could handle spiritual energy to a degree. The instant he’d touched her, he could sense her poor circulation, which compromised both her health and her spiritual energy.

“Sorry. Things have just been so busy,” she apologized.

“You always put yourself last. When it gets this bad, you need to come to me or Sanae,” Koutarou scolded her. He was always polite with Kiriha, but his tone now was especially stern.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

Kiriha understood his sincerity and offered hers in return. She wouldn’t dare tease him for being seriously worried about her. Besides, she had her back to him now. Since he couldn’t see her face, anything playful she said or did might be misunderstood.

“Jeez...”

Koutarou continued to rub Kiriha’s shoulders, pouring spiritual energy into his hands the same way Sanae would. He didn’t have her psychic touch, but it would still help improve Kiriha’s circulation a bit.

As he worked, Theia suddenly let out a giggle. When Koutarou and Kiriha turned to look at her, she was leaning against the table on her elbows and smiling at them.

“What is it?” Koutarou asked.

“You haven’t realized, Koutarou? You never would’ve done this a year ago.”

“Like I said, it’d be weird if I didn’t now.”

In a similar situation in the past, Koutarou had avoided giving the girls massages. He’d counted on the girls to take care of themselves barring extenuating circumstances. In his mind, that was the appropriate thing to do, but lately, that mentality had started to change. He now felt like he needed to repay the girls for everything they’d done for him.

“How considerate of you, Satomi Koutarou. Yet you still wouldn’t touch me anywhere but my shoulders, would you?”

“That’d be the weirdest of all!” Koutarou exclaimed emphatically.

“...That’s a relief,” Kiriha replied with a smile for some reason.

“Huh?” Koutarou was surprised by this.

“I can feel your emotions through the palms of your hands... and I’m relieved.”

Koutarou groaned. He was in the middle of giving Kiriha a massage, meaning he was pouring his spiritual energy directly into her. With it came his feelings, and that was indeed a relief for Kiriha. She now knew what was in his heart, no matter how he might try to deny it.

“I-I really wouldn’t...”

“Of course not. I must have misunderstood.”

“Y-Yeah...”

However, Kiriha didn’t press the issue. She wanted to spare the dignity of the man she loved. She was content to torment him more when it was just the two of them.

Once her massage was over, Kiriha headed into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Thanks to Koutarou, her shoulders felt lighter as she rhythmically chopped up ingredients. There was a unique joyfulness to the sound.

“She’s like a wife happily making dinner,” Shizuka pointed out. The other girls had more or less the same impression.

“Veltlion is always soft on Kii,” said Clan.

“Really? I think he’s the softest on you, Glasses,” interjected Sanae.

“I used to think so too, but lately I’ve started to think it’s someone else,” threw in Yurika.

“Who?” Clan and Sanae asked at the same time, turning her way.

Responding to their stares, Yurika pointed over her shoulder.

“Nana-san. At least, that’s what it seems like to me.”

Nana currently had several blueprints spread out behind Yurika and was discussing something with Koutarou. They were so focused

on it that they didn't even notice Yurika and the others looking at them.

"You're the only one small enough to infiltrate through there, Nana-san," said Koutarou. "My armor would definitely get me stuck."

"Could you please not treat me like a child?" she replied.

"That's not what I'm talking about. I know you're an adult, Nana-san."

"...That stings in its own way."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Well, I *am* a woman... so I'd be happy if you appreciated my looks and personality, I think."

"You're so cute that I know you can get through an air duct."

"What?! Now it *really* sounds like you're treating me like a child!"

"Seriously, what do you want me to say?!"

With room 106 as packed as it was, Koutarou and Nana were sitting shoulder to shoulder as they looked at the blueprints together. The way they talked made them sound like close siblings, but in reality, Nana was much older. Seeing them together like this, the other girls felt Yurika was onto something.

"You're right. Veltlion does seem to be soft on Nana..." commented Clan.

"I imagine her looking younger than even Theia-chan has something to do with it."

"She doesn't look much older than a sixth grader..." added Theia.

Again, Nana was older than Koutarou and the rest of the Corona House crew. But nevertheless, she was petite and had a remarkably youthful appearance. As Theia said, she could have passed for an elementary or middle school student.

"I think something happened between them at the beach." When Shizuka said that, everyone turned to look at her. It was simply too loaded a comment for them to ignore. "I mean, didn't they make all those preparations in secret? That's the kind of opportunity you need to really get close to someone."

"It's not impossible..." Clan murmured.

"Since it's Nana-san, I think it's fine," said Yurika.

"If anything, Nana's like one of us," added Theia. "She's been through a lot."

Most women would have a thing or two to say about the man they loved warming up to someone else, but the girls' hearts went out to Nana. They felt no sense of antagonism toward her whatsoever. Especially not after more than half her body had been replaced with machinery. Given how much they'd all come to love her, the girls would never dream of stopping Nana from getting closer to Koutarou. They honestly felt it would be okay if she fell in love with him too.

“Um, so where were we again?” Nana asked.

“We were talking about how adorable little Nana-san can crawl through air ducts.”

“...You can be surprisingly mean at times, Satomi-san.”

“And you can be surprisingly cute at times, Nana-san.”

“Gosh! You’re doing that on purpose aren’t you?!”

“Yes.”

“Satomi-san!”

Nana was particularly cute in the moment, almost like she’d regained a spark of childlike innocence.

“Dinner will be ready soon so— What are you doing?”

The girls continued to observe her and Koutarou until Kiriha walked in to get them for dinner.

The group stopped what they were doing to clean up the inner room for dinner, and by the time they were done, everyone else had returned to the apartment too. Koutarou and the girls made for a party of ten, and lately Nana had been joining them as well. Nana was with them tonight as well for a total of twelve people. Room 106 was as crowded as ever.

“You have to eat your vegetables, Yurika-chan,” Nana reminded her.

“Okaaay.”

“Is there anything you don’t like to eat, Nana-san?” Koutarou asked.

“As a former soldier, I can eat anything,” she replied.

Sanae normally sat next to Koutarou, but Nana took that seat tonight. She and Koutarou had been putting their heads together all evening, and they continued to chat away even now with dinner on the table.

“I imagine Maki-san is probably the same way,” she suggested.

“That’s right. My preferences don’t affect my palate. I’ve even taken survivalist training.”

“So how’d Yurika end up hating so many foods even though she’s in the military too?” Koutarou had to ask.

“I’m not cut out for it.”

“Still,” Koutarou laughed, “for being able to eat anything, you sure don’t eat much, Nana-san.”

“How much food do you think this body can handle, Satomi-san?”

“You’ll never get taller if you don’t eat right.”

“I’m already a grown adult!”

Koutarou’s first impression of Nana had been that she was brilliant and levelheaded, but that perception had changed over time. Right now, he felt like she might actually be as young as her

appearance led one to believe. Beneath her calm, cool, and collected demeanor was a childish side after all. Of course, being treated like a child still upset her. She was just about to voice a complaint when...

“Satomi-san, what do you think I— Oh?”

“What is it?” Koutarou asked.

“Well, my right hand feels strange.”

“Let me see.” Koutarou eyed Nana’s hand, which she raised for him to get a better look. Since he was sitting to her right, she practically held it up to his face. “It looks the same as always to me.”

“The movements feel unnatural, like there’s grinding...”

Nana set her chopsticks down on the table and made a fist, opening and closing it repeatedly. It appeared perfectly normal to Koutarou, but Nana said it didn’t feel right.

“Hey, Clan?” Koutarou called over to his partner in crime.

“On it. Hold these for me,” she replied, pushing her bowl and chopsticks at Koutarou before fiddling with her bracelet. “Nana, can you do without your right arm for a minute?”

“Sure.”

Nana’s arm abruptly stopped moving and went limp. It was one of her artificial limbs, and Clan had switched it into maintenance mode.

“Hmm, the system’s not reporting any abnormalities... What do you think, Pardomshiha?”

“Looking at the nervous system data, it’s just as Nana-sama says. The feedback is a little different from normal.”

Clan and Ruth worked together to analyze Nana’s arm. Since they were the ones who’d developed the operational system for her artificial body parts, they were more familiar with them than anyone.

“Here, Clan. It’s going to get cold,” Koutarou offered.

He then used Clan’s chopsticks to hold out some food for her. He wouldn’t ordinarily use such poor manners at the table, but she was working hard for Nana’s sake right now. He would’ve felt bad letting her dinner get cold.



“Hom.”

Without hesitation, Clan took a bite of the food she'd been offered. Today's main dish was Kiriha's handmade gyoza.

“Homma nomph nomph.”

“Swallow before you talk.”

“Hahh!”

Koutarou fed Clan gyoza after gyoza. Theia did the same for Ruth on the other side of the table. Watching the four of them, Nana suddenly burst out laughing.

“Hmm?” Koutarou perked up at this and turned to look at her.

Their gazes naturally met. Nana smiled, her warm eyes full of kindness. It suddenly dawned on him that she couldn't use her right arm at the moment.

“Here.”

And so he held out a gyoza for her too. He didn't know what she was thinking, but he felt it was worth a shot.

“Satomi-sa—” Nana faltered in surprise, but then... “Nom.”

She smiled again and happily chomped down on the gyoza. She looked like a kid being fed, and the sight put a smile on Koutarou's face.

“Urk... You're treating me like a child again, aren't you?” When Nana saw him grinning, she swallowed her gyoza and furrowed her brow.

In response Koutarou shook his head. “I would never. I was just thinking about how cute you are.”

“Like a child?”

“Yes. I mean... no, not at all.”

“I wonder...”

Despite his assurances, Nana only grew leerier. Koutarou decided it was best not to mention that pouting made her look even more childish.

The repairs to Nana's arm took half an hour from start to finish. Replacing a few parts occupied most of the time, but all in all, it was a quick and easy job. Nana opened and closed her hand again when the work was done and didn't feel anything strange. Everything was back to normal.

“Thank you very much, Princess Clan, Ruth-san.”

“No thanks required. That was simple customer service.”

“Do let us know if you experience any other problems.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Nana bowed gratefully to the two girls. In spite of her looks, she was incredibly mature. Not only that, but her military background

made her especially decorous. Once she'd thanked Clan and Ruth properly, she turned around.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Yurika-chan, Maki-san. Let's go."

"Okay."

"Yes."

The other two magical girls had been doing their homework, but when Nana called out to them, they closed their notebooks. The three of them would be going out together.

"Meow!" Snoozy desperately climbed up into Maki's lap. He didn't want to be left behind.

"We're not going out to play, Snoozy."

"Meow..."

"We're going out on patrol, so wait here with everyone else, okay?"

Indeed, the three magical girls were set to go out on patrol tonight. While Yurika and Maki were assigned to protect room 106, Rainbow Heart's primary mission was to prevent the misuse of magic. The girls regularly made rounds around town to that end.

"Let's take him with us. He's worried about you, Maki-san," suggested Nana.

"Yeah," agreed Yurika. "Can't you use your special carrier?"

They both seemed to be on the cat's side. They'd feel too sorry for him if he got lonely at home.

"Oh, fine... Can you be a good boy, Snoozy?" Maki asked.

"Meow!"

"Then let's go together."

"Meow, meow!"

It was already late and the girls would be out for several hours, so Maki had been planning on leaving the cat at home, but she ultimately relented and decided to bring him along. In the end, Maki was soft on Snoozy.

"Nana-san, would you please forgive me already?" Koutarou called out as the girls made to leave.

"Don't talk to me." Nana, however, departed in a huff. She was still steamed.

"Satomi-san, it's really unusual for Nana-san to get this mad," Yurika noted.

"I hope she forgives me by the time you guys get back... What do you think, Snoozy?"

"Meow!"

Snoozy ran after Nana, and Maki couldn't help laughing. "It looks like he's going to smooth things over for you," she commented.

"I hope to goodness it works... See you later, Aika-san."

"See you."

Thus the magical girls set out on patrol. Most of the time, the job was incredibly uneventful. There were few magicians in Japan and even fewer who would abuse magic. The girls thus rarely had any encounters while they were out, but they did the rounds regardless to keep the neighborhood safe. It was quiet work, and they expected tonight to be no different... Yet they were very, very wrong.

After the magical girls left on patrol, Koutarou brought out a new board game. He wanted to do a test run to get a grasp of the rules.

"There sure are lots of pieces here, Koutarou," Sanae remarked, touching a plastic bag chock full of parts for the game.

"I think those are for the zombie hordes," he explained.

"So we're fighting zombies?" Sanae brought the plastic bag to her face. Up close, she could see tiny human figures with tattered clothing—the zombies.

"No," Koutarou replied. "Apparently every player makes their ideal zombie village."

"I can see why it's called 'The Afterforest,'" said Harumi, scanning the back of the game box.

Currently, Koutarou was sitting at the tea table with Sanae, Harumi, and Shizuka. The four of them were looking at the game with great interest. Theia, Ruth, and Kiriha were around too, but they were all staring intently at their computers or various documents instead.

"So we build villages?" asked Shizuka. "Sounds pretty peaceful for a zombie game."

"Well, humans do attack from time to time, Landlord-san."

"We get to make villages and defeat humans?!" exclaimed Sanae. "Now that sounds fun!"

"A battle between zombies and humans, is it? I'm glad the characters look cute," commented Harumi.

The theme and main goal of the post-apocalyptic game was survival. Each player made their own zombie village, which would occasionally be attacked by human enemies controlled by other players. Whoever could last the longest and defeat the most humans would be declared the winner.

"It says here that it's for four to ten players," said Sanae.

"Then it's just perfect for us," Harumi giggled.

The Corona House crew was ten members strong, meaning it was a game they could all play together. They might even be able to squeeze in Nalfa and Kotori, who were becoming regulars around room 106 as well.

"Apparently five people are recommended for the best balance," read Harumi.

"Ideal or not, we can still playtest it with the four of us, right?" asked Shizuka.

The instructions advised five players for the optimal gameplay experience, but the group only had four people available to play at the moment. Shizuka thought it would still be plenty, and Koutarou agreed. Sanae, however, had a different idea.

“Don’t worry, leave this to Sanae-chan! Hyah!” she shouted, a wicked grin on her face. “Now we have five!”

With a poof, she’d forcibly separated her spirit from her body to call out Sanae-san. That was Sanae-chan’s idea of a solution.

“S-Sanae-chan, can you please stop doing that so suddenly?!” Sanae-san begged.

“Who cares?” Sanae-chan replied, exasperated.

“I do! I need time to mentally prepare!”

“Jeez, you’re such a pill...”

No sooner had they split than the two Sanaes began arguing. Though they shared the same soul, they looked and sounded like separate entities at the moment. No one thought there would be any issues with them playing each other in the game.

“She always makes that look so easy...” Koutarou remarked in awe.

Sanae essentially had a split personality, but by sharing her soul and body, her two halves could coexist. It was a most unusual situation, and one that not many people would be able to manage or handle... yet Sanae did it like it was nothing. Since Koutarou could use a small amount of psychic power himself, he understood just how incredible that was. He was impressed every time he saw it.

“But wouldn’t you feel a little lonely if Higashihongan-san suddenly stopped being able to split herself?” Harumi asked.

“Honestly, yeah...”

“You really are no match for Sakuraba-senpai, Satomi-kun,” Shizuka laughed.

“Okay already,” said Koutarou. “Let’s get this game started.”

“Hey, he’s trying to change the subject!” Sanae-chan cried.

“Look who’s talking!” yelled Sanae-san.

With that, the five of them settled down and set up the game together. But just as they were about to start playing...

“I’m back!” a familiar voice announced from the front door.

“Wait, huh?” Koutarou was puzzled when he heard it.

It couldn’t possibly be who he thought it was based on the direction it was coming from. Befuddled, he turned to see who it really was...

“Announcing a not-so-proud return is yours truly, Higashihongan Sanae!”



By all appearances, it was a third Sanae. And, true to form, she burst into the room flashing a peace sign. No matter how Koutarou looked at her, she was *definitely* Sanae. Everyone else seemed to see the same thing, and thus room 106 erupted into a clamor. Sanae-chan and Sanae-san were the most vocal of all.

“That’s me!”

“It’s us!”

They were both aghast to see a third version of themselves.

“What’s going on? Did you finally figure out how to split yourself into three?” Koutarou asked. He and the girls were used to Sanae’s antics, so they figured this was some new trick.

“It does indeed look that way,” remarked Harumi.

“No!” Sanae-san exclaimed. “That’s completely different... Um, it’s hard to explain, but she’s not the same Sanae.”

“But she is *a* Sanae?” Koutarou asked.

“Yeah, no doubt about it,” Sanae-chan answered.

“But she’s not another part of us,” Sanae-san clarified.

“Whaaat?!” Koutarou exclaimed.

The surprise didn’t fully set in until he heard what Sanae-san said. A Sanae, different from the two he knew, had appeared out of the blue. When this dawned on all of room 106, the apartment fell into an uproar. Even the girls who’d been working finally stopped what they were doing.

“S-Sanae-sama, where did you come from?!” Ruth asked.

“Well, from right here,” the third Sanae replied.

“You mean you had another body we didn’t know about?!” Theia asked.

“No, that’s not it. This is my body—just a different one,” the third Sanae replied again.

“Does that mean you came from the future?!” Clan asked.

Based on her own experiences, that was her first guess. The third Sanae looked a little more grown-up upon closer inspection, so it seemed like a logical conclusion to Clan. Nevertheless, the third Sanae shook her head.

“It’s a little different from that too. How do I explain this...?” she mumbled.

“Don’t ask me,” said Koutarou.

“Well, um...” The third Sanae really wasn’t sure what to say, so she folded her arms to think.

While the group waited for an explanation, Koutarou scrutinized the third Sanae. There was no doubt in his mind that she was the real deal. Her behavior and mannerisms were just like Sanae’s, after all.

A third Sanae, huh...?

However, like Clan, Koutarou also felt that this Sanae looked a bit more mature. That made him uneasy. He didn't want to imagine what might have forced her to grow up so quickly. While he was thinking, he could hear the front door open again.

"We're baaaack! Hey, she really did come here, Maki-chan!"

"Oh, good! I wasn't sure what to think when she suddenly flew off like that."

"I'm just glad we found her before things got any more complicated. Although it looks like everyone here is confused enough as it is..."

The three magical girls, Yurika, Maki, and Nana, had returned from patrol. And based on their conversation, it sounded like they'd already encountered the third Sanae.

"Oh, welcome back, everyone!" she greeted them.

"Don't give us that," Nana replied, somewhat disgruntled. "We were worried sick when you disappeared on us."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to see everyone as soon as possible..."

"I understand how you feel, but please be more careful considering the circumstances."

"Yeah. I will."

The magical girls seemed relieved to find the third Sanae at the apartment. Seeing this, Koutarou figured that they must have some idea of what was going on. He quickly turned to Nana for answers.

"Nana-san, what is going on here? Who is this Sanae?"

"I still don't fully understand it myself, but it seems this Higashihongan-san comes from another world."

"Another world?!"

Sanae's psychic abilities were so powerful that paranormal phenomena were a daily occurrence around her. The rules of the real world and common sense practically didn't apply to her. But even though Koutarou was used to that, this news still shook him.

While Nana, Maki, and Yurika were out on patrol, they'd happened upon the third Sanae as she fell from the sky like a meteorite. She'd tried to explain things to them too, but she hadn't had much luck. Thankfully, however, she'd remembered that she had a letter in her possession to do the explaining for her.

"And this is that letter?" Koutarou asked.

"Yes, and while we were reading it, she disappeared," Nana recounted. She then handed the opened letter to Koutarou. After everything that had happened, it seemed she'd forgotten that she was angry at him.

"That sounds just like Sanae, yeah."

"Eeheehee."

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Koutarou gave the third Sanae a hollow smile and glanced at the addressee of the letter. When he saw the words “To Satomi Koutarou-sama and friends,” he called for Kiriha.

“I think you should see this, Kiriha-san.”

“What is it?”

“Take a look at this handwriting.”

Koutarou presented her with the letter. She looked confused for a moment, but then sagely nodded as she scanned the document.

“This is my writing.”

“I thought so.”

“There’s no doubt about it, yet I have no memory of writing this.”

Kiriha understood why he’d specifically called her over, but she couldn’t tell him what he wanted to know. Though the letter was written in her hand, she personally had not written it. Overcome with a strange feeling, she returned the letter to Koutarou.

This isn’t the first letter I can’t remember writing, though... I wonder if this contains a clue to the mystery of the first.

Kiriha was thinking of the letter that had appeared that spring. That, too, had been in her own handwriting. It had stated that her memories of April 5th had been altered, but the exact details were unclear. That still bothered her, so she was hoping this second letter might contain more information.

“The Kiriha from my world wrote this, so please read it,” the third Sanae urged. She’d given up on trying to explain the situation herself.

“Okay, I will.”

Koutarou nodded and pulled the letter from the envelope. Its contents left him utterly confounded.

To Satomi Koutarou-sama and friends,

If the formulas Clan-dono left behind are correct, Sanae should have safely reached you to deliver this. I’m sure you must be surprised to see her, but please keep your wits about you and read this letter carefully. It contains critical information about an enemy you’re destined to fight.

First, allow me to explain that we are from a reality different from your own—a parallel world that diverged from yours at some point. It appears that the years have passed differently for us, so our Sanae might look slightly older than yours, but rest assured she’s still Sanae. I imagine you’ve come to see that already.

There is too much to cover concerning the existence of parallel worlds, so I will omit any attempt at an explanation. I’m sure your Clan-dono will be able to fill you in on the details. Allow me instead to fill you in on the abnormality that has occurred in our world.

It all began when Maki and Clan-dono disappeared. We didn't know what happened to them at first, but investigation revealed the cause. They were swallowed by what Sanae refers to as "the creepy spinning thing," also known as the gates of hell or whirlpool of chaos.

We used every method at our disposal in an attempt to save them, but the results were not favorable. And in the process, a new enemy who wears gray armor and wields the power of the whirlpool appeared. We call him the Gray Knight, and as we fought him, we suffered further losses.

The Gray Knight's goals are unclear, but we believe he is planning to make his way to your world. He has seized the necessary means to do so, including magic and spiritual energy technology. This was a most unexpected discovery for us, but in truth, it might be the clue we need to turn the tables. Whatever the Gray Knight means to accomplish, since you oppose the whirlpool of chaos, you are inevitably an obstacle to him. This is why we felt the need to warn you of him. And by sending you reinforcements knowledgeable of the situation, we hope the odds of the battle to come are in your favor.

Please consider this letter your warning and Sanae your reinforcements. In all honesty, I would have loved to send you more help, but only Sanae was capable of crossing the boundary between our worlds. Her powerful spiritual energy allows her to withstand the shock of the journey, so she is our only hope.

I do not know if you have already encountered the Gray Knight, but if the powers of chaos have been getting stronger in your world lately, then it won't be long. He wields not only chaos, but also magic and psychic powers. From here on out, if you encounter the whirlpool, assume that he's behind it. And if he has yet to appear, please use the time you have left to prepare.

Just in case, I have recorded the formulas for moving between parallel worlds in a memory device enclosed in this letter. Clan-dono and Ruth should be able to confirm their authenticity. With that, I hope you understand that this letter is no lie and no joke. In the event of an emergency, please make use of the formulas. And if, by blessed fortune, you are able to resolve everything, please use them to return our Sanae to us (if she so wishes).

Finally, I would like to apologize. We were unable to solve this problem ourselves. For that, I am profoundly sorry. Please forgive us for asking you to handle it.

We began our battle with the Gray Knight at a disadvantage. He ambushed us at the outset and remained one step ahead of us at every turn thereafter. We subsequently lost our opportunity to mount a comeback, and we were thus left with no alternative but to rely on you. I can only hope this letter and Sanae reach you, and that they will be of help. We pray for your victory.

Once he finished reading the letter, Koutarou speechlessly passed it to Kiriha. He was struggling to accept its contents and wanted her analysis. He also wanted to know what she would say about it coming from “another world.” Kiriha took the letter and quietly, carefully read it. When she was done, she pulled the small memory device from the envelope.

Seeing this, Koutarou asked her briefly, “What do you think?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind that I wrote this,” she replied. “It’s not just my handwriting. Even the style is identical. Including the formulas as proof is something I would do too.”

Kiriha did not doubt the letter’s authenticity. If she had to write a letter to explain comparable circumstances, this was exactly how she would do it herself.

It’s also similar in feel to that letter from April. I wonder how these two letters are related...

Kiriha also considered the letter from April a compelling piece of evidence. The similarities were just too striking. But because she couldn’t bring that up, she kept her assessment to the letter at hand.

“Of course it is! That’s because our Kiriha wrote it. She wanted to beat the Gray Knight to the punch in your world,” said the third Sanae. She was relieved that they were finally on the same page.

“The Gray Knight, huh?” mused Koutarou. “I don’t think we’ve met the guy.”

This mysterious Gray Knight was a central figure of the other Kiriha’s letter. Koutarou had no idea who it was, however, so even if the letter was real... it still didn’t quite *feel* like it.

“He attacks using magic, spiritual energy, and science at the same time. But that’s not all. He also uses a weird, vague gray power,” said the third Sanae, her smile quickly disappearing as she tried to explain. She didn’t fully comprehend his powers, so she had a difficult time communicating their danger to Koutarou and the others.

“He uses a vague, gray power, you say?” Theia asked, her head cocked to the side.

That detail struck her as strange. They’d encountered the whirlpool of chaos on multiple occasions, yet everyone it preyed upon had ultimately been swallowed by its power. It used people—not the other way around. The other girls were similarly puzzled with one exception, or rather two.

“Sanae-chan, she must be talking about *that*, don’t you think?”

“Oh! You mean when the enemies suddenly disappeared in their secret base?”

Sanae-san and Sanae-chan had an inkling. The description of “a vague, gray power” reminded them of what had happened in the raid on Ralgwin’s base. Just before Koutarou and the girls seized victory, Ralgwin and a portion of his forces had escaped via a gray mist. It had reeked of the whirlpool’s power, so it had made a strong impression on Sanae.

“There were no traces after they disappeared, so that’s a possibility,” Kiriha agreed.

They’d investigated the incident after the fact using science, magic, and spiritual energy technology, but nothing had yielded any information about how Ralgwin and his men had gotten away. It was as though they’d simply vanished into thin air. If that was the doing of this mysterious Gray Knight, it would actually explain a lot.

“What are you talking about?” the third Sanae asked.

“Uhhh... you explain,” Sanae-chan quickly replied, looking to Sanae-san.

“What?! Um, we attacked the bad guys’ secret base this one time, but everything got gray and fuzzy around them, and that’s when they disappeared.”

The third Sanae nodded upon hearing this. “Yeah, that’s how he works. Happens all the time.” She’d seen him disappear in that fashion several times herself.

Koutarou watched the three Sanaes with a smile. “This is a relief...”

“What is?” Clan asked upon seeing it.

Koutarou pointed at the trio and explained, “No matter where she’s from, she’s still Sanae. There’s no mistaking it.” He was now absolutely certain of her identity after seeing them together.

“That’s true,” Clan conceded. “It also lends credence to her claims about coming from a parallel world.”

“Yeah.”

Sanae never lied about anything important, so if this girl really was Sanae, then there was no reason to doubt her now. Koutarou and the girls, as reluctant as they might be, had no choice but to believe her and the letter.

“That being the case,” said Clan, “it sounds like we don’t have much time to waste.”

“Yeah. We now know the enemy’s coming. Moreover, you and Aika-san were swallowed up by the whirlpool in her world,” Koutarou said with a severe expression.

Not only did they need to defeat the Gray Knight, they needed to save Maki and Clan from the third Sanae’s world. They’d been able to help Dark Purple, but would they be able to do the same for someone else? If the mysterious Gray Knight was involved, it likely wouldn’t be

easy. Koutarou wanted to begin making preparations as soon as possible.

"I know. But first things first, we need to verify those formulas," Clan said bitterly.

With infinite parallel worlds in existence, there were inevitably some where Clan was already dead or had never existed to begin with. She knew that, yet even so, she couldn't simply ignore the fact that she'd been swallowed by the whirlpool of chaos in the third Sanae's world. Maki likely felt the same way. But even putting her emotions aside, Clan felt compelled to act, for she'd realized another element of danger in the situation.

"You mean for traveling to other worlds? What's the rush there?" asked Koutarou. In his eyes, if they trusted Sanae, then there was no reason to verify the formulas for proof. He thought her word was enough.

"You don't understand, do you? Just the first half of this is enough to recreate my Super Space-time Repulsion Shells," replied Clan. She was looking at the bigger picture here.

"Oh! So that's what you mean!" Koutarou gasped.

He finally realized what she was getting at. If the Gray Knight had the means to travel between parallel worlds, that meant he also had the potential to weaponize the ability. Clan was rightfully worried about that possibility and wanted to study the formulas in hopes of finding or developing a defense against it.

"So we need to hurry... Pardomshiha, let's begin right away."

"Yes! I'm happy to be of help!"

Clan took the memory device from Kiriha, then she and Ruth both quickly made to leave. They'd be using the lab aboard the Hazy Moon to test and research the provided formulas. Time was of the essence and their mission was dire, so they departed the apartment with serious expressions on their faces.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Koutarou," apologized the third Sanae.

He and the girls believed her story. They even understood the gravity of the situation. Clan and Ruth were already getting to work on it, in fact. Sanae really did feel guilty about what she was putting them up to.

"I'll admit getting a third Sanae is kinda mind-blowing," replied Koutarou.

"Yeah! It's like when the third Love Cure finally comes along!"

"I-I don't think that's a good comparison, Sanae-chan..."

"Yeah, c'mon! Take this seriously! I'm doing my best to be serious here too!" shouted the third Sanae in a complete change of tone. She was angry that Koutarou and Sanae-chan had derailed the

conversation.

But that was exactly what Koutarou had been hoping for. “That’s more like it, Sanae. That’s how you should be,” he said.

“Koutarou...”

“Besides, you’re way more important to us than this Gray Knight guy. If you’re in trouble, of course we’ll help you out. No matter where you’re from.”

“Thanks...”

Sanae nodded as tears began to well in her eyes. They eventually spilled down her cheeks and dripped off her chin. She, too, now felt like Koutarou was Koutarou—no matter where he was from.

“See?! It’s this just like a *Love Cure* story?”

“Sanae-chan, shh! Don’t ruin the moment!”

A certain wish began to blossom in the third Sanae’s heart. With it came hesitation, however, so she decided to ask first.

“Koutarou...” she hesitantly called out.

“You don’t have to be so reserved with me,” he replied.

“Yeah, but... I’m from a different world, you know?”

“That doesn’t matter. To me, you’re still Sanae. So you can do whatever you want.”

“...Thank you. I think I will.”

With that, the third Sanae softly hugged Koutarou. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed him tight. Koutarou wasn’t sure what to do at first, but he soon returned the hug.

“Is this all you need?” he asked.

“Yeah. I just needed a little pick-me-up.”

“You were lonely, weren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“You came to another world all on your own, after all. But we’re together now.”

“Yeah. I’ll do my best for everyone...”

The third Sanae hugged Koutarou for a while. She said nothing more, simply because she felt no need for words. She was comforted enough as it was.

Once she returned to her room below room 106, Kiriha quietly began pondering the situation. She did not doubt what the third Sanae had said, nor did she doubt the letter. But there was still something bothering her.

There was nothing about the other girls in the letter. And it didn’t even mention our biggest concern at all. Why would I have done that?

It was the omissions in the letter that worried Kiriha most. The letter had recorded the disappearance of Clan and Maki, but short of Sanae, there wasn’t one word about the fates of the other girls. It was strange.

The situation might be more troublesome than we think...

If Kiriha were in the shoes of her alter-self, she would have been sure to include that information. She felt there had to be a reason the other Kiriha had left it out. Perhaps the other girls were seriously wounded, for example. That bit of information would have spurred Koutarou to immediately come to their world, meaning it would be easier to resolve the situation in this world if he remained none the wiser about their condition. But that was only one possibility. Kiriha suspected that, whatever it was, the reason was grave.

As she was thinking, there came an unexpected knock at her door.

“Kiriha, do you have a moment?” It was Sanae—most likely the visitor from a parallel world. The Sanae of this world wouldn’t have bothered knocking.

“Come in,” Kiriha called. “It’s not locked.”

“Thanks.”

Without hesitation, Sanae stepped inside. As Kiriha expected, it was the third Sanae. She approached Kiriha with a meek expression.

“What’s the matter?” Kiriha inquired. “It’s pretty late.”

“There’s something I need to tell you. Just you.”

Sanae walked over to Kiriha and silently stared at her. The third Sanae looked more grown up than the Sanae of this world, and that impression was only strengthened in this moment.

“It’s about the version of me from your world isn’t it?” Kiriha asked.

“You knew?”

“Indeed. That information seemed intentionally left out of the letter... But you don’t look very surprised.”

“Yeah. My Kiriha said that you would figure it out on your own if she wrote it that way. You really are Kiriha too, huh?”

“I see.” Kiriha could make sense of what her other self had written with the expectation that she could read between the lines. She sagely nodded and gestured toward a nearby chair for Sanae. “This won’t be a short chat, will it? Please have a seat.”

If this were quick and easy, Sanae wouldn’t have had to come all the way to her room to discuss it. She could have just mentioned it in passing whenever the opportunity presented itself. So, in preparation for their discussion, Kiriha began pouring tea for the two of them.

“Thanks,” said Sanae, taking a seat and a cup of tea from Kiriha.

She silently watched the surface of her drink for some time, but Kiriha did nothing to rush her. She simply offered snacks that the haniwas brought in for them. And after long enough, Sanae finally looked back up with a determined expression.

“I’m sorry for dragging my feet. I have something important to tell you.”

"It does indeed seem serious."

"It is, so here goes!"

Sanae then began to share the finer details of what had happened in her home world. She meant to tell Kiriha absolutely everything before she lost her nerve. She relayed the story of how Clan and Maki had been swallowed by the whirlpool, and then what happened afterward...

"We tried all kinds of things to get Glasses and Maki back, but that's when the Gray Knight started coming for us. We made contact with the spinning thing—the whirlpool of chaos—to try to save them, which made it easier for him to attack." There, Sanae forlornly cast her eyes downward. She couldn't continue while making eye contact. "Next were Theia and Ruth. Then Yurika. We were being swallowed in the opposite order we met Koutarou."

"That's what happened?!" Kiriha was surprised. She'd braced herself for bad news, but this was just about the worst case scenario.

"It was probably my turn next... But before it happened, we completed the device to allow travel between parallel worlds. And now I'm here."

"I'm impressed you could finish it without Clan-dono."

"Our Glasses had already done most of the research thanks to her bomb before she was swallowed. So Ruth, Kiriha, and Yurika did the rest."

The other Clan had continued R&D around the Super Space-time Repulsion Shell after her own time travel experience. It was nearing its final phases, and she had been close to fully unraveling the mysteries of space-time when she was taken. Ruth had found the research data after her disappearance and created the blueprints for the world-hopping device, which the other girls had helped her complete.

"So it was thanks to their quick work that you were able to reach us," remarked Kiriha.

That point was actually of some concern to her. Rather than relying on Sanae's powers alone to protect her on her journey, it would have been safer to use a spiritual energy condenser and field to shield her. No matter how strong she was, she still had her limits. Spiritual energy tech should have allowed the other girls to travel with her as well. So why hadn't they used it? The answer was simple... There'd been no time.

"It was really close," said Sanae. "The Gray Knight was attacking the Hazy Moon, so everything was done in a hurry... Kiriha even said it was a total gamble, but we couldn't just let him wipe us all out."

"So the others who were left behind are already..."

"Yeah... Probably either dead or swallowed by the whirlpool."

There's no way to know for sure, though..."

The moment was burned into Sanae's memory. She'd watched in horror as Harumi and Shizuka held the Gray Knight at bay on the other side of the hatch while Kiriha finished the preparations to send her away.

"I've activated the device. In thirty seconds, you'll be transported to another world."

"I'm ready!"

"Listen, this is a gamble. There's at best a fifty-fifty chance of success."

"But we have to try! We'll just lose otherwise."

"You're our only hope. I'm sorry—"

Bang!

"He's here!"

"Kiriha!"

"Don't worry! I won't let him lay a finger on you or the device!"

The second before the device had activated, Sanae had seen the hatch blow open and the Gray Knight step through. Kiriha then put herself between them, and the next moment... Sanae was gone.

She could only imagine what had happened to Harumi and Shizuka, but she knew it couldn't be good. If they were alive and well, they never would've let the Gray Knight through the hatch. And it was hard to imagine Kiriha had defeated him alone. She had no proof, but Sanae feared the worst for them all. That was part of what she wanted to tell the Kiriha of this world.

"So you don't have to worry too much about saving my world, okay? I think it's already a lost cause."

Once Kiriha fell, there would have been no one left to stop the Gray Knight. Sanae could hardly believe Earth, the underground, Forthorthe, and Folsaria were all still safe.

"So that's why you didn't say anything..." Kiriha mused.

"Yeah. If I had, I'm sure Koutarou would've jumped to action. Even if everyone there's already dead..."

"Indeed. That's just the kind of man he is."

Defeating the Gray Knight alone would be difficult. If Koutarou and the girls of this world were also saddled with trying to save a parallel universe, their chances of success would only diminish further. That was why the other Kiriha had told Sanae to keep quiet about their fates. If such information was to be revealed, she asked that it wait until after the Gray Knight was taken down.



“But I’m the only one who knows, so if I die, then no one knows... That’s why I’m telling you, Kiriha.”

“A prudent decision.”

The secret Sanae carried might be a key factor determining the battles to come. It was too important to risk letting it die with her, so she’d decided to come clean to Kiriha for safety’s sake.

“So if there’s ever a battle, try to make sure the two of us aren’t in the same place,” requested Sanae.

“Understood,” replied Kiriha. “I’ll also write a letter just in case.”

“You really like letters, don’t you?”

“Yes. I feel like they’re a great way to convey thoughts and feelings.”

“I’m pretty sure our Kiriha said the same thing.”

“We are the same person, after all.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to see that.”

A small smile finally appeared on Sanae’s face, though she looked somewhat lonely to Kiriha.

“Sanae, there’s something I’ve been wondering about,” she said.

“What is it?”

“The Gray Knight is already here and assisting Ralgwin, but didn’t you come here before him?”

“I left before he did, yeah, but with our prototype device, I ended up wandering through space for a while.”

With every advantage, the Gray Knight had reached this world before Sanae. The journey through space-time wasn’t easy, so the other Kiriha had tried simplifying things by only sending Sanae through time. It was the safest course of action; it had just meant that it took her longer to arrive on Earth after making the time jump. And in the meantime, the Gray Knight had arrived first.

“So that’s how it worked out,” commented Kiriha. “The Gray Knight must have gotten his hands on your data and jumped straight here regardless of the risks. That’s how he was able to arrive first and make a preemptive strike.”

“I think so too, yeah.”

Though they couldn’t say so definitively, both Kiriha and Sanae believed that was what had happened. The Gray Knight had departed later, yet had arrived sooner thanks to a more accurate jump.

“Is that all you wished to tell me?” Kiriha asked.

“No, it’s not.” Sanae shook her head. She still had more to share. “There’s one more thing. Probably what you want to know the most.”

“I did notice it was omitted from the letter as well.”

“This is actually what I wanted to talk to you about most.”

“...Let’s hear it.”

Kiriha's expression tensed. She'd had a terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach all this time, and the fact that Sanae was only bringing this up after the girls' fates alarmed her even more.

"It's about Koutarou..."

Thus Sanae began explaining what had happened to Koutarou. The news shook Kiriha, and it would play a vital role in shaping their battle to come.

Unexpected Attack

Wednesday, August 17th

With a third Sanae having joined the Corona House crew, a certain problem arose—how to address her. Having Sanae, Sanae-chan, and Sanae-san already was confusing enough, so the group deliberated on how to address the new Sanae from another world. They suggested all kinds of nicknames, resulting in a great fuss. They fielded everything from “Healing Magical Girl Sparkling Sanarin” to “Super Space-time Detective Sanaban,” but in the end, everyone agreed that addressing the slightly more mature Sanae like an older sister would be best. The Sanaes had petitioned for a nickname more like an anime heroine’s, but they couldn’t deny the appropriateness of Shizuka’s suggestion. Thus it ultimately passed unanimously.

“Say, Onee-chan,” called Sanae.

“What is it?” replied Sanae-nee.

“I have some really good news and some really bad news. Which do you wanna hear first?”

“Hmm, let’s have the good news.”

“The Sun Rangers really do have robots that they can combine into one giant robot.”

“Heck yeah! For real, Megumi?!”

“Yes, for real... But that’s supposed to be a state secret, Sanae,” Megumi reminded her.

“It’ll leak eventually anyways.”

“Maybe so, but in the adult world, we have to save face.”

“So, what’s the bad news?” asked Sanae-nee.

“When we raided the enemy’s secret base the other day, one of the giant robot’s legs blew up.”

“Oh no! Say it isn’t so!”

“Sanae-chan, please!” begged Megumi.

“Eheeehee.”

Today, both Sanaes were in the Harukaze High infirmary so Sanae-nee could get a physical. Clan had given her a check-up aboard the Hazy Moon the day she arrived, but they also wanted her to have an exam with standard medical equipment just to be absolutely certain she was in good health. Forthorthian medicine was far more advanced than that available on Earth, but it technically wasn’t designed for Earthlings, and they didn’t want to leave any room for

doubt. No one had ever traveled between parallel worlds before, after all.

“Let’s see...” Megumi, the school nurse, looked up from her chart and said, “Everything looks good to me.”

“Good for you, Onee-chan!”

“Told you I was fine.”

“C’mon. Everyone’s just worried ’cause they love you.”

“Oh... In that case, I guess I don’t mind.”

“That’s what I wanna hear!”

Fortunately, all was well with Sanae-nee. Kisshouharukaze High School was now equipped with Sun Ranger technology, including a state-of-the-art infirmary. Megumi was also a trained combat medic with a doctor’s license. And according to both her and the equipment in the infirmary, Sanae-nee was in great shape.

“All right, let’s go help Koutarou and the others!”

“Roger that, Onee-chan!”

“Onward, Private!”

“Aye, aye, sir! But I wish you’d promote me!”

“I’ll consider it!”

With Sanae-nee’s physical over with, the two Sanaes bolted for the door and burst through it. It seemed that, though she was a little older, Sanae-nee hadn’t grown up all that much.

“Hey!”

“Whoa!”

As the girls shot out of the room like cannonballs, they flew past Hayato and Kotaro, who were about to enter.

“Sorry about that!”

“My bad, Kotaro!”

Both Sanaes apologized but neither slowed down one bit. They left Hayato and Kotaro in the dust, and the two Sun Rangers watched them go in disbelief.

“Say, Kotaro, not much surprises me anymore after meeting that girl...”

“Yeah, same.”

“But... weren’t there two of her just now?”

“Physically and everything. No doubt about it.”

“Thought so. That actually did surprise me...”

“It got me too...”

Hayato and Kotaro stood frozen in place for a while, struggling to come to terms with what they had just seen. They’d witnessed lots of things before, including Sanae astral project, but how could they *not* be surprised after literally seeing double?

As the calendar crept toward the end of summer vacation, it

was soon time to receive the new round of transfer students from Forthorthe. The Harukaze dorm and other facilities were completed, essentially transforming the campus into a small town. It had a convenience store, cafeteria, and even a post office. The transfer students would be able to live there comfortably without ever going down the hill into the city.

“How’s it looking, Clan?” asked Koutarou.

“I’m not detecting any strange signals or gravity waves,” she replied.

“There’s nothing on Karama and Korama’s spiritual energy sensors either,” reported Kiriha.

“No aura-based communication going on around here, ho!”

“And no enemy presences, ho!”

“You got anything, Aika-san?” inquired Koutarou, turning to her.

“There are no signs of mana within a 150-meter radius. A sorcerer like Grevanas might be able to conceal his, but in that case, there’d be almost no disturbance in the natural mana, so I think we’re fine.”

Koutarou and the girls were currently walking around the school, examining the newly completed dorm and surrounding facilities while they were at it. They wanted to eliminate any possible danger as well as thwart any more spying incidents, so these patrols had become a regular occurrence for them of late. They never knew when trouble might strike.

“This area seems all clear, Master,” said Ruth. “Let’s move on to the next.”

“Okay,” he replied. “Let’s get a move on, everyone.”

“At this rate, it’s going to be smooth sailing,” Theia sighed, relieved that they hadn’t come across any issues yet. Of the schools accepting transfer students, Harukaze High fell under her jurisdiction.

“Don’t let your guard down,” Koutarou implored her.

“I won’t. The athletic grounds are next, though. It’s not really worth spying on or attacking since ceremonies and such take place at the gymnasium instead,” she countered.

“I guess that’s true. The fields are wide open, so it’d be better to strike somewhere else.”

“Right? So we should be safe for now.”

There was little strategic value in targeting such an inefficient location—one with only a handful of spread-out targets. It would be far more effective to prioritize somewhere people gathered in large numbers, like the dorm or gym. The same was true for reconnaissance.

“Ooh, Satomi-kun! Please don’t let Theia-chan lure you into a false sense of security,” hummed Shizuka.

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry, Theia. We gotta keep at it.”

“Okay, okay.”

“You only need to say it once.”

“Okay.”

In reality, Shizuka didn't think they were in for any danger either. Nevertheless, there was always the off-chance that something might happen. If trouble was brewing at the athletic grounds and they weren't prepared for it, they'd be in real trouble. Her crisis management skills as a landlord kept her calm and alert.

“Kiriha-san, factoring in Landlord-san's concerns... where do you think Ralgwin's forces would attack? Maybe at the welcoming ceremony for the new transfer students?”

Koutarou had no intention of letting his guard down as Shizuka feared, but there was a realistic limit to how thin they could spread their forces. They'd need to keep a vigilant eye on the most at-risk areas.

“Unfortunately, terrorists do like to attack symbols of peace and unity,” Kiriha acknowledged.

“I was afraid of that...” Koutarou mumbled.

“However, it's also possible they might take advantage of that line of thinking. They might strike locations less populated than the ceremony venue, or even somewhere far away from it. Anywhere with Forthorthians is a potential target.”

The welcoming ceremony would be a heavily guarded event, so Ralgwin might choose another location. He'd most likely weigh his options and choose the most effective yet least guarded target.

“How do we stay a step ahead of him?” asked Koutarou.

“We position a network of guards for easy deployment to any location,” replied Kiriha.

“But that'll increase their response time.”

“Indeed. So we'll call in Nefilforan's airborne troops as our first responders.”

“Good plan. We can definitely count on them.”

It was impossible to account for every potential scenario. The safest play was to station guards at key locations based on their risk. Areas of minimal concern would receive minimal protection, and all leftover units would be strategically positioned in a net for easy deployment wherever Ralgwin decided to strike. It would take the units time to reach the location, however, so they'd be calling in Nefilforan's unit to fill the gap. They could deploy near instantaneously, making them the ideal forces for that kind of situation.

“Still, we cannot overlook the possibility of a diversion, so we'll split Nefilforan's airborne troops into five strike forces,” Kiriha concluded.

“Now *that's* thorough,” remarked Koutarou. “Guess I had nothing

to worry about.”

“Knowing that the commander-in-chief cares about the details is reassuring for both tacticians and troops on the ground.”

“Yeah, it’s too bad the commander-in-chief is kind of an amateur when it comes to modern warfare...”

Koutarou was confident in his military knowledge, but he was only familiar with the ancient ways of two millennia ago. He had no familiarity with the present-day ways of war, and that made him uneasy.

Seeing him fret, Harumi gently called out to him. “Don’t worry. All you have to do is trust in the competent people who support you, and then ultimately take responsibility. That’s the commander-in-chief’s job.”

“Yeah, it’s almost too bad that you’d make a better leader, Sakuraba-senpai...”

Whenever Koutarou found himself hesitating, Harumi always showed him the way. Each and every time, he felt that she should be the one leading—not him.

“Did you say something, Satomi-kun?”

“Yeah. I said you’re looking cute again today, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“Jeez! You should be taking this more seriously, Satomi-kun!”

“Sorry. You’re just so cute, I wasn’t even thinking.”

Sakuraba Harumi had all the makings of a good leader, but she personally preferred only to be a princess behind the scenes—or perhaps one day to a small family. Knowing this, Koutarou refrained from commenting further on her leadership qualities. She didn’t seem too unhappy about being called cute, however, so all was well.

“Sorry to interrupt your fun, but let’s get back to business,” interjected Kiriha.

“S-Sorry,” apologized Harumi.

“Let’s have more fun later, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“I hate that side of you, Satomi-kun.”

Ignoring the pouting Harumi for now, Koutarou and Kiriha returned to the discussion at hand.

“...Now, I want you on guard at the welcoming ceremony,” she informed him.

“Shouldn’t we all be with the surface troops on standby?” he questioned.

Kiriha wanted Koutarou and the girls on location for the ceremony, but that didn’t make sense to him. Given the odds of an attack elsewhere, he wanted to be somewhere they could deploy with ease.

“The problem is if you or Theia-dono are targets yourselves,” Kiriha explained. “If you’re mobile, they may try to lure you

somewhere.”

It was hard enough to get a read on the enemy’s behavior, and it would be even trickier to predict their reactions to the way Koutarou and the girls behaved—there were two layers of deduction. That being the case, Kiriha wanted to simplify the equation by having them in a static location. Even if they could count on a diversionary attack, there was too much to account for if they were on the move.

“If we fall for a diversion and you, Clan, or I die, it would be a heavy blow to Forthorthe. We need to be as prudent as possible here,” Theia cut in.

“This must be pretty serious for you of all people to say that.”

“Why do you have to put it like that?”

“It was a compliment, you know? You’ve grown over the past two years and learned to be patient.”

“Indeed. You serve an excellent princess.”

“See, this would’ve been a nice little exchange if you hadn’t gone and said that.”

A diversion would be a big risk, but one that could be mitigated by keeping Koutarou and the girls stationary. This was the best plan Kiriha and Theia had been able to come up with. Yet just as Theia was about to speak up again... the haniwas came flying over with dire news.

“Ane-go! We just got an emergency message from Daiha-sama, ho!”

“Sial City was attacked, ho!”

The city of Sial was an underground settlement of great importance to the People of the Earth. Their capital, in a sense. An attack there was most alarming news to Koutarou and the girls.

“Why would they go for Sial now?!” Kiriha exclaimed, her face pale.

As the daughter of the People of the Earth’s chieftain, she was particularly stricken. She hadn’t expected a blitz attack while she and the others were distracted with the transfer students. There was no apparent reason for the enemy to target Sial, so it hadn’t been a location of any concern.

“What’s the extent of the damage?” Kiriha’s expression and voice were both tense. It was difficult to remain calm and collected in the face of an attack on her hometown.

“The battle is already over. Fortunately there were no casualties, ho!”

“The enemy only attacked the old city, ho!”

Some time ago, Sial had entered a redevelopment phase. Its older districts were virtually devoid of people and rarely saw visitors—that was where the enemy had struck, which thankfully had kept the

victims to a minimum. At worst, some of the visitors to an old cemetery had suffered light injuries.

“Good... That’s the most important thing.” With a sigh, Kiriha’s expression eased. She was extremely relieved to hear no one had died.

“That’s great news, Kiriha-san,” Koutarou said with a small smile.

Sial was Kiriha’s home, and Koutarou had been there several times himself. He was personally invested in what happened to it, so he, too, was relieved to hear there were no fatalities.

“It is...” Kiriha smiled softly at Koutarou, but a pensive look soon overtook her face. “Still, the situation is rather strange.”

“That’s true. Why did they attack the old city? Is there something special there?”

Koutarou was curious about that part. As far as he knew, there weren’t any important facilities in the older districts. All the military and industrial centers were on the newer side of town. A military strike would have prioritized those targets, while a terrorist strike would have prioritized populated areas. Either way, there was no reason to attack the old city.

“Hey, hey, what are you guys talking about?”

“Yeah, why the serious faces? Cheer up, everyone!”

That’s where the Sanaes of both worlds joined in. It hadn’t taken them long to pick up on the serious mood. Sanae-nee wanted to know what was going on while Sanae wanted to lighten the mood.

“My hometown, Sial, was attacked, but fortunately no one was seriously hurt,” Kiriha explained.

“Oh...” Sanae-nee sighed.

She was a little relieved. She’d been on guard for an attack by the Gray Knight, so she was glad to hear it wasn’t him. The Sanae of this world, however, was unfazed and didn’t miss a beat.

“That’s a surprise, but I’m glad everyone’s okay. If the bad guys didn’t kill anyone, though, does that mean they stole something?”

From the explanation she’d heard, Sanae was imagining a burglar breaking into a house. The haniwas didn’t seem to think she was far off.

“Maybe so, ho! Ane-go, we have a follow-up report, ho!”

“The attacking force was made of walking corpses and skeletons, and they went after an archive and a cemetery, ho!”

“An archive and a cemetery?”

Kiriha furrowed her brow as a thought flashed through her mind. She looked over to Maki, but before she could say anything, Maki nodded. She’d had the same thought.

“I think so too. If it were me, that’s what I would do,” she said.

“You would, hmm? This might be problematic,” Kiriha mused.

“What are you talking about?” Koutarou wasn’t able to follow

their exchange, but Kiriha was now deep in thought, so he turned to Maki for an explanation.

She began, “If walking corpses and skeletons were involved, then a magician is responsible. And if a magician is attacking an archive and cemetery, it can only mean one thing.”

The old city was home to a state cemetery and a historical archive. The cemetery had been part of the redevelopment project, so many families had chosen to move their loved ones to new resting grounds in the newer districts. The deceased without any living kin, however, remained in the old cemetery. The archive, meanwhile, had been built upon freed-up land in the old city in order to display objects of historical value—the most irreplicable of which were replicas, with the real artifacts kept in the vaults below.

“In other words, the goal was to plunder graves and steal artifacts in order to revive someone.”

Only the oldest part of the cemetery, which contained graves relocated from the surface when the People of the Earth moved underground, had been attacked. The archive vaults had also been pilfered. Indeed, the enemy’s goal seemed clear.

“They’re after Violbarum Maxfern...”

Koutarou now understood the situation. There was no rationale for a magician to target those exact locations unless their intent was to revive Maxfern. The reason for the cemetery was obvious, and they’d needed to raid the vaults as well because, unlike the Folsarians, the underground dwellers didn’t bury their dead with possessions.

“Indeed, Grevanas was behind this and his goal is to resurrect Maxfern. That leads us to a certain conclusion,” Kiriha announced, taking over the explanation.

Not just any magician knew about the People of the Earth, the same as normal underground dwellers didn’t know about magic. Only those in high places on either side knew the truth (a protective measure to combat the leak of spiritual energy technology and magic). Aside from them, only Ralgwin knew about both factions. He’d already gotten his hand on spiritual energy tech, and though the evidence was purely circumstantial, Koutarou and the girls now believed he had access to magic too. He was using the power of the whirlpool of chaos, and to control it, magic was a must. Ralgwin, however, stood to gain nothing from raiding an underground cemetery and archive. That meant he had to be working with someone else.

“Grevanas has allied himself with Ralgwin,” Kiriha concluded. “That explains the attack.”

Grevanas likely meant to revive his sworn friend Maxfern. To that end, he needed Maxfern’s remains and belongings. That indeed explained the attack on the cemetery and archive—but it also

suggested he was working with Ralgwin. Grand magician or not, there was no way Grevanas had realized so soon that the underground dwellers were the descendants of Maxfern and his alchemists. Someone must have told him.

“I really wish this wasn’t related...” Koutarou said with a heavy sigh.

The group had had a hunch all this time, but they’d been hoping it wasn’t true. A rebel army armed with spiritual energy technology working together with an evil grand magician was the worst possible development.

“That being the case, Ralgwin may have actually been responsible for Grevanas’s revival as well,” Kiriha speculated.

It would’ve been far too much of a coincidence if someone else had decided to revive Grevanas at such a convenient time for Ralgwin. It was easier to think that he was really the one pulling the strings behind the scenes.

“But then how did the bad guys find out about Folsaria? They shouldn’t have known about magic,” Yurika asked—a reasonable question.

Ralgwin and his forces had quickly gotten ahold of spiritual energy technology, but magic still should have been an unknown to them. Moreover, who would believe it even existed? Yet lo and behold, Grevanas was shortly thereafter revived and now the two of them were working together. The group thought it was quite strange. Sanae-nee, however, had the answer.

“It’s his fault. The Gray Knight, I mean,” she said. “He can use spiritual energy technology and magic. He brought them together.”

The Gray Knight could use both spiritual energy technology and magic—meaning he ultimately had a connection to both Folsaria and the underground, even if from another world. Presuming that he’d been the one to draw Grevanas and Ralgwin together, everything started to make sense.

“This might actually be our chance to get a leg up on them,” Kiriha said with gleaming eyes. While most would be intimidated by two of their enemies joining forces, she saw it as an opportunity.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“If they want technology, there’s something they’ll inevitably need to do—and we can take advantage of that.”

Kiriha spoke in such vague terms that Koutarou couldn’t grasp what she was getting at. He could hear the confidence in her voice, however, and he knew that she was extraordinarily dependable at times like this.

As Kiriha and Maki suspected, Grevanas had attacked the People

of the Earth with the intent to resurrect Maxfern. He'd retrieved his remains from the cemetery and his belongings from the archive vaults. He would gather the requisite residual thoughts for the ritual from those, allowing him to recreate Maxfern's soul.

"You seem to be in a foul mood despite how well things went, Grevanas," remarked Ralgwin.

Since Koutarou and the girls had been fully preoccupied with the transfer students, the attack had gone off without a hitch. It was almost like stealing candy from a baby. But in spite of their success, Grevanas looked displeased to Ralgwin.

"I am impressed you can tell given my current appearance," replied Grevanas.

"It's nothing special once you get used to it. And, appearances aside, you're still human."

"Your manner of speaking reminds me of Maxfern-sama."

"Now then, what's the problem?"

"Simply put, the degradation of his residual thoughts is terrible."

"I see. Well, it has been ten millennia since he and his alchemists arrived on this planet."

"Even with the help of spiritual energy technology, it's most difficult to make up for ten thousand years."

Grevanas wasn't getting the results he'd hoped for with the recovered remains and belongings from the raid. The wear and tear of time on residual thoughts was extreme. Spiritual energy technology had come a long way, but not even it could make up the difference. If Grevanas attempted a revival now, he'd only be able to create a man that resembled Maxfern. And that wasn't what he wanted; he wanted the real thing.

"In that case, what if you only needed to make up for two millennia?"

"Oh...?" Grevanas turned his desiccated eyes on Ralgwin. Physical sight failed him, but Grevanas could perceive Ralgwin clearly with his powers as a magical being. Ralgwin could also detect a hint of surprise in those dried-up eyes. "Based on what we know, two thousand years should be workable."

It was possible to get material that was eight thousand years more current by taking Grevanas to Forthorthe. There, he should be able to get his hands on Maxfern's belongings and even a DNA sample with far less degradation. That alone would significantly increase his chances of resurrecting Maxfern perfectly.

"Then would you accept my help?" Ralgwin offered. "I'll expect your help in return."

"I have already agreed to share my techniques upon Maxfern-sama's resurrection... Does this mean you seek further aid?"

Strictly speaking, Ralgwin and Grevanas weren't exactly allies. Grevanas had offered to provide the weapon known as magic, but he had no interest in joining Ralgwin's fight. At present, his only goal was Maxfern's revival. He had no reason to go out of his way to fight Koutarou and the others.

"That's right. I think it'd be best if we further our cooperation. I'm sorry to say it... but you would stand out in modern Forthorthe."

"You hit where it hurts, but I do imagine you are correct."

Grevanas had no way to get back to Forthorthe on his own, and once there, his lich form would stand out like a sore thumb. He could change his appearance with magic or use magic to quell anyone who would oppose him, but that would be risky and ineffective. In that sense, Ralgwin offering a free ride to Forthorthe was a most tempting offer. Grevanas was ignorant of the ways of the modern world, meaning he'd need Ralgwin's assistance anyway.

"It would also be for our safety," Ralgwin reminded him.

"I'd expect as much from a descendant of Maxfern-sama... How draconian."

Ralgwin's proposed arrangement had one additional benefit for him—to make it difficult for Grevanas to turn on him. As things stood, once Grevanas made good on delivering magic to Ralgwin, they would go their separate ways. That meant they might find themselves working against each other in the future, but an established alliance between them should prevent that. At the very least, Grevanas would work with Ralgwin until he found a base of operations upon returning to Forthorthe. The arrangement would give them both a sense of security.

"Understood... Let us work together for a while longer, then," Grevanas agreed.

"The less trouble, the better. If possible, I'd like to defer it all until later."

"You can say that again. Hahahaha..."

Grevanas's dry laughter reverberated in his room. His haunting voice made Ralgwin uneasy, but he wouldn't allow himself to be intimidated. He immediately began thinking about how to reap as much as possible from their deal.

With that sealed, Ralgwin left the room. There was work to do. Following close behind was his subordinate Fasta. Ralgwin wore a serious expression, but hers was downright grave. She looked full of grim determination.

"Ralgwin-sama, please allow me to make a suggestion."

"Fasta?"

She was asking for permission to speak her mind—an unexpected request that surprised Ralgwin a little. She'd worked under him for

some time now, faithfully completing even the most difficult of missions... but she'd never offered much in the way of an opinion. Curious about this, he was willing to hear her out. Such flexibility was something that his uncle had lacked.

"Go ahead and speak," he urged her.

"Ralgwin-sama, even if it's to defeat the Blue Knight, you mustn't trust those men! You should cut your ties with them as soon as possible!"

Fasta meant Grevanas and the Gray Knight. She believed that they were dangerous and that Ralgwin was better off keeping his distance from them.

"I understand that you might be repulsed by his appearance, but I would prefer you didn't say as much out loud."

"That's not what I'm talking about!"

This wasn't something Fasta had just decided to blurt out. She'd been stewing on it for a while now. It was impossible to tell what Grevanas and the Gray Knight were thinking. Dealing with such inscrutable people was dangerous. Even black market agents were a safer bet. Their goal was always money, so it was easy enough to gauge their motivations and the associated risks—but there was no telling what was at stake with Grevanas and the Gray Knight. All they could do was guess, and that made Fasta extremely nervous.

"I understand," Ralgwin acknowledged. "But cutting ties with them would leave us unable to defeat the Blue Knight. It would mean everything we've done so far was for nothing."

The same reservations had crossed Ralgwin's mind, but his uncle had invested too much in the war against the royal families. Lives had been lost. Cutting ties with the two mysterious figures who'd appeared would be easy enough, but it was as good as admitting defeat. The battle against the royal families would be lost, and everything that had gone into it would be wasted. Ralgwin wouldn't stand for that. At the very least, he couldn't cut ties with them until Grevanas shared his magic with them.

"But even the Gray Knight said our alliance would only be temporary... He clearly means to break things off with us eventually!"

The Gray Knight was cooperating with Ralgwin because it benefited both of them for the time being—and it wouldn't necessarily in the future. If the Gray Knight also meant to conquer Forthorthe, he and Ralgwin would eventually butt heads. Fasta dreaded the idea of having an opponent who knew everything about them, so as far as she was concerned, the faster they cut ties, the better. Ralgwin understood that.

"That's why I've forged ahead for now. As things stand, they won't betray us until we reach Forthorthe. Our safety is assured until then."

Since he couldn't cut ties with Grevanas, Ralgwin had chosen the second best option. In orchestrating his deal, his primary concern was their safety. Like Fasta, he didn't trust Grevanas or the Gray Knight.

"I'm worried for you, Ralgwin-sama!"

"Fasta..."

"I don't want to see them take you in!"

Grevanas and his undead ways, the Gray Knight and his mysterious techniques... Who knew what terrifying things either man was capable of? If they unleashed them on Ralgwin, they might even take over his forces. That concerned Fasta, but it was just a front. In truth, she was most concerned about Ralgwin himself. Though he'd taken up arms against the crown, he was a master she'd served for a long time. A comrade she'd been with through thick and thin. She'd never abandon him.

"Fasta... When we get back to Forthorthe, leave the army. Creating a fake identity for just you will be easy."

"Ralgwin-sama?!"



Fasta's eyes shot wide open. She'd never dreamed she'd hear Ralgwin say that. It was nearly unthinkable for someone so cold. Just the other day, he'd severely punished a group of would-be deserters as traitors. She'd steeled herself for similar treatment before she made her suggestion, so what he said shocked her immensely.

Ralgwin was driven by revenge. He wanted to defeat the man who'd killed his uncle, and he was willing to accept and even exploit civilian casualties to that end. But even so, he wasn't thoroughly heartless. He held his longtime forces dear. Ralgwin resembled Vandarion in many ways, but they were fundamentally different people. Being harsh with deserters was a necessary evil to protect the soldiers he cared about. Ralgwin and his men were stranded on Earth, so traitors leaking information could spell the end of their entire unit. Even when their base was under attack, rather than order his soldiers to fight to their deaths, he'd asked them to surrender if it came to that. He cared about his men. If he didn't, the mission on Earth would've long collapsed already.

He cared about Fasta too, which was why he didn't consider her suggestion the act of a traitor in any way. If she meant to betray him, she would've fled in the midst of battle. Speaking her mind to her superior wasn't a betrayal; at worst, it was insubordination. That was why, rather than punishing her, he was giving her an out.

"Live a normal and happy life. You're competent... but too kind."

Forthorthe was a big empire. Even if it turned to war, removing the planet Fasta lived on from the list of targets would be simple. She could live out her life in peace no matter what happened in the future. Losing a competent ally would sting, but even so, Ralgwin couldn't bring himself to punish a subordinate who'd risked everything for him.

Pursuit

Tuesday, August 23rd

The Sanae of this world had been turning over a simple question. Her two selves, Sanae-chan and Sanae-san, inhabited the same body, but it was hard to say that they were exactly the same person. Neither one wanted to become the other, so at times, Sanae-chan and Sanae-san would appear simultaneously. However, that wasn't the case for Sanae-nee. There was only ever one of her.

"So I wanted to know what happened to your Sanae-san," Sanae-chan said nonchalantly one day while leaning over the tea table.

Floating above her, Sanae-san chided, "You can't just ask that unprompted, Sanae-chan! When you're talking to people other than me, you have to explain yourself!"

"Um, it's always just you, Onee-chan, so I wanted to know what happened to your other self."

"We needed to power up, so we completely merged together," she answered readily.

"Wait! We can power up by merging together?!" Sanae-chan squealed.

"Yeah. You're basically duplicating for the two of you, right? If there's only one, you're a lot faster and stronger," she explained.

In order to harness the full power of her abundant spiritual energy, the Sanae from another world had merged her two selves together. Her adult appearance wasn't just because of the difference in age—she'd matured in more ways than one. The Sanae of this world, meanwhile, was constantly projecting and using her spiritual abilities to maintain two souls. It was a taxing feat that tapped her power. If she merged her selves too, she could also harness her full, uninhibited potential.

If I hadn't done it, I wouldn't've been strong enough to come to this world...

Sanae-nee had resolved to merge in order to cross the barrier between universes. Even with her exceptional power, it was hard to get through because she had to break down her body and soul in the process. It would've been possible for her to do it unmerged with the assistance of spiritual energy technology, but there hadn't been time to set that up. She'd needed a lot of spiritual power, and fast. She wanted to keep both versions of herself, but the sacrifice had been

necessary.

“Hey, let’s merge, Sanae-san!”

“You can’t make decisions like that so lightly, Sanae-chan! You just want to do it because powering up sounds fun, right?”

“Heck yeah!”

“If we fully merge, we won’t be able to undo it. You have to consider it carefully.”

“What? We couldn’t go back?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Then I’m not doing it.”

Sanae’s eager excitement deflated once she realized the merge would be permanent. She didn’t want to get stronger badly enough to lose Sanae-san.

“I think that’s for the best,” Sanae-nee acknowledged with a smile.

If she’d had a choice, there would still be two of her too. Even if they were ultimately the same person, she’d always enjoyed spending her days talking to her other self. She forced a smile to hide her loneliness. That was when...

“Well, look at you... You went from one to three. It’s like something out of a manga.”

Koutarou reached out and patted Sanae-nee on the head. The gesture surprised her as much as his words.

From one to three?

The idea struck her, especially since she’d been telling herself she was alone all this time.

“All right, let’s connect Onee-chan too!”

“Stop! You can’t do that without permission!”

“It’s fine. We can just cut it if she doesn’t like it. So... take this!”

The Sanaes of this world were constantly connected by a spiritual cable that they used to share information and energy. Without warning, Sanae-chan extended the cable and plugged it into Sanae-nee too. Since they were the same person, the connection went smoothly and a vast amount of information and energy began circulating between the three Sanaes. They used it to communicate with their psychic powers.

“Hiya again, Onee-chan!”

“I’m sorry for Sanae-chan’s rudeness...”

“It’s fine. Thank you, both of you.”

Suddenly, Sanae-nee discovered that she’d regained what she thought she’d lost—twofold to boot. It was a happy occasion, yet tears began to stream from her eyes. Since the other two Sanaes understood, however, they said nothing.

“...Huh? What’s wrong, Kiriha?”

Instead, Sanae-chan called out to Kiriha. She’d picked up on

information that was flowing to her from the older, more perceptive Sanae-nee.

“Nothing. I was just... thinking.” Kiriha smiled like it was no big deal, but she couldn’t fool the three Sanaes.

“Koutarou, Kiriha’s in code red! We need immediate rescue and support!”

“I get what you’re saying, but I don’t get how I’m supposed to rescue and support her.”

“Stay by her side and listen to what she has to say.”

“You should’ve just said that from the start.”

Though puzzled by her delivery, Koutarou understood what Sanae meant. Kiriha was the type to always keep things to herself.

“So, what are you hiding, Kiriha-san?” he asked.

“I’m not hiding anything,” Kiriha replied, casting her eyes downward.

It was an unusual gesture for her, which indicated that something serious was weighing on her mind. In light of this, Koutarou decided to do something unusual himself.

“Spit it out! Nothing good comes of hiding things from me!”

He grabbed her head with both hands and started smooshing her cheeks with his palms. The bewildered Kiriha’s beautiful face was distorted this way and that. When Koutarou saw it, he was reminded of her as a child and couldn’t help smiling nostalgically. Seeing his wistful grin was the finishing blow on Kiriha, who finally relented and opened up.

“Our pursuit is flagging,” she began. “We may not find the enemy before the summer vacation ends.”

She was worried about the lack of leads on Ralgwin. She was working under the assumption that he and Grevanas had joined forces, so she’d been concentrating her search efforts on logistics. She was hoping to find them by monitoring the flow of supplies.

“That’s what you were talking about before, right?” Koutarou asked.

“That’s right. Spiritual energy tech, magic, and Forthorthian science all require specialty goods. I figured that we would be able to track them down that way... but I’m afraid the search won’t yield results before the term starts.”

The specialty goods required for each technology weren’t in common circulation. For example, a spiritual energy condenser used crystals and wouldn’t function without them. Magic and Forthorthian tech had comparable requirements, and there was only one person who’d be amassing all three at the same time—Ralgwin. Kiriha’s intention was to find him by tracking the movement of the relevant goods.

“I was hoping to end this before school started back up, but that’s starting to seem less and less likely,” she lamented.

There was almost no doubt that Ralgwin would attack the welcoming ceremony. Striking a location with both Earthlings and Forthorthians would divide public opinion, making it easy to destabilize diplomatic relations. It would be even more effective to dress up the attackers as Earthlings, as during the attack on Nalfa. Koutarou and the others wanted to stop that before it could happen.

“It’s not your fault if we can’t find them, Kiriha-san,” Koutarou assured her.

“Just a few days’ delay could make a big difference in casualties. It’s not something I can take lightly.”

As Kiriha had demonstrated, pursuing the enemy was their best course of action. The problem was the timetable. With spiritual energy, magic, and science at hand, finding Ralgwin wouldn’t be too hard—just time consuming. And every day counted now. That was why Kiriha had turned her attention to logistics, but she was being thwarted at every turn. It felt like one step forward and two steps back. At this rate, she was certain they wouldn’t find Ralgwin before the ceremony.

“You girls are the ones who told me not to shoulder everything on my own, so why are you doing it now?” Koutarou asked, continuing to smooch Kiriha’s cheeks.

Without her, they wouldn’t be able to track things like this in the first place, so Koutarou wasn’t concerned about how long it was taking. It wouldn’t have been faster with anyone else in charge. If anything, the delay fell on Theia as the head of the diplomatic mission’s security, or Koutarou as the commander-in-chief. There was no reason for Kiriha to feel solely responsible.

“I have my own reasons for not wanting to push the responsibility on you,” she said.

“Who said anything about pushing responsibility on people? It’s not like we’re the terrorists here,” he replied.

“I know that... but accepting it isn’t so simple.”

Terrorists who struck fear into the hearts of innocent civilians were to blame for their own aggression. Kiriha understood that. But with lives on the line, she couldn’t help feeling responsible for what was to come. Her heart was too big for that.

“I’m not really sure how to say this, so I’m just going to spit it out knowing that you might misunderstand... but I’m glad that you’re so worked up about it, Kiriha-san.”

Koutarou didn’t enjoy the fact that Kiriha was upset, nor did he want anyone to get hurt. But still, he was glad that Kiriha was a gentle girl who worried so much about other people. Her kindness had

helped him through a lot.

“Koutarou...”

Fortunately, Kiriha understood exactly what he meant. She felt the same way about him, and she was glad to know the feeling was mutual. It lifted some of the weight from her shoulders.

“Then please support me if I get depressed again,” she said happily.

Having someone to believe in, someone who would stay at her side at all times, was a huge boon. No matter what great obstacles awaited, it would give her the courage to keep going.

“You bet I will. That’s just how it goes—both ways.”

“Attaboy, Koutarou! Spoken like a true samurai!” Sanae cheered in high spirits. Lately Koutarou had started showing more consideration for the girls’ feelings, and the warm atmosphere it generated made her quite comfortable since she could read other people’s emotions.

“Very well,” said Kiriha. “I’ll make the necessary preparations.”

“What preparations, Kiriha-san?” Koutarou asked.

“I’ll just be changing into a bolder pair of underwear.”

“W-Wait, what?! What’s that got to do with supporting you?!”

“Oh, it’s directly related.”

Kiriha was already composed enough to be making jokes again. Being serious and kind were good qualities, but worrying so much she lost all composure would only worsen the situation. Koutarou had helped Kiriha when she was troubled, yet now he was the troubled one.

“Ane-san, emergency report from Investigation Team 40, ho!”

“They’ve discovered that a store specializing in magic materials has been selling to Ralgwin, ho!”

The ones that helped Koutarou out by tossing him a lifeline were the haniwas, who came into the room with breaking news. This was no time for jokes now. They finally had a lead on Ralgwin.

“Excellent job! You have my thanks! Really!”

“Too bad. I won’t get to use my new underwear yet.”

Kiriha sounded disappointed, but there was no sign of it on her face. She was happy they’d found a lead before the start of the term. They should be able to safeguard the welcome ceremony now.

Monitoring the flow of specialty goods sounded like a simple task, but in reality, keeping track of the items and all related information was a complex undertaking—especially for three different types of goods. If a particular item couldn’t be located, sometimes following its trail was enough. If all leads went cold in a particular region, for example, that would suggest that the towns in the area warranted a thorough search. From there, it was possible to determine where

exactly the goods in question were “disappearing.”

As far as tracking down the production of scientific weapons was concerned, the key goods to monitor were the rare base metals employed by Forthorthian technology, like platinum. Following those metals should eventually lead the group to Ralgwin, but unfortunately, his purchases didn't particularly stand out in a sea of similar transactions. Rare metals were in high demand for use in Earthling technology as well, after all. So, in order to narrow things down, the group checked rare metal sales against purchases of the other key components too.

For spiritual energy technology, that key component was a type of crystal used in spiritual condensers. Condensers were a fundamental part of spiritual energy technology. They took in spiritual energy from their surroundings to power weapons and tools. Without them, only people with excess spiritual energy like Sanae could utilize the technology. It was hard to imagine that Ralgwin had several powerful psychics working for him, so he'd likely be in the market for spiritual condensers and the crystals to make them.

As for magic, the key items to track would be ritual components. The most common means of creating magical weapons was ritual magic, and mass production required far more mana than any single magician could muster. Ritual magic allowed a spellcaster to supplement their energy with special items. Ralgwin was almost certainly in the market for those as well to manufacture magical weapons of his own.

So by tracking all three types of materials together, the group had finally gotten a lead on Ralgwin's whereabouts. The decisive factor was ritual components. Folsaria was a relatively small nation with only a handful of shops that dealt in said components, as they were strictly regulated. Thanks to that, the group had been monitoring the black market, where they'd been able to trace sales back to Ralgwin. But while the ritual components were what had broken the case, the group had only had their eyes in the right place thanks to the other investigative teams narrowing down the list of locations to look. It was truly a feat of cooperation.

“So, where is he?” Koutarou as he looked around the tea table.

Everyone was gathered there—Koutarou himself and all nine girls, plus Nana and Nefilforan. It was like an unofficial meeting between Forthorthe, Folsaria and the People of the Earth. And everyone understood that the situation called for it.

“A mountain near Kisshouharukaze High School, of all places,” Kiriha answered while pointing to a map on the wall.

Clan brought up some supplementary data provided by the Japanese government alongside it. “It seems he's using an old bomb

shelter,” she added.

“If it’s an abandoned government facility, then it’s no wonder no one saw them coming and going. They were right under our noses the entire time,” Shizuka remarked with a nod.

As a landlord, she frequently participated in civic meetings around town. Old shelters were a topic of discussion from time to time, like when an area needed to be surveyed again after someone stumbled across one. In most cases, the shelters were long abandoned and difficult to find because records of them had been lost after the war. They were prime locations to convert into secret bases.

Shizuka continued with an especially serious expression, “We’ll need to be wary of anyone who may have tipped Ralgwin off about the location. Or maybe he’s just that cautious...”

Since the old shelters were hard to locate even for the residents of the city, it seemed unlikely Ralgwin had found one by accident. He either had an informant in the area, or he’d simply been that thorough in investigating and preparing a new base of operations. Shizuka feared the former. Intentional or not, one of her acquaintances might be feeding the enemy information.

“I agree. We can’t rule out a surface dweller working with him, even if it’s against their will. We’ll have to factor that into our assault,” Kiriha said with a nod.

Said cooperator could be used as a hostage and put in danger. There was no guarantee that would happen, but it was a grim possibility they needed to keep in the backs of their minds.

“So we’ll be going on the offensive?” Harumi asked quietly, picking up on the implied meaning of Kiriha’s last words. She preferred not to fight but understood that it was necessary at times. Silent determination filled her eyes.

“Indeed,” Kiriha answered her. “We cannot sit by and wait for them to finish preparations. Moreover, the ceremony is swiftly approaching.”

Kiriha was every bit the pacifist Harumi was, so her call for battle was a particularly weighty one. It was dangerous to attack without enough intel, but the outcome if they waited might be far worse. That was why she felt the need to attack in spite of the danger.

“I think it’s for the best too. He’s not sitting around waiting for us either,” Sanae-nee agreed with a solemn expression. She, however, was most concerned about one particular threat—the Gray Knight. After losing her friends, she knew all too well how dangerous he was.

“Then we’ll blitz them after breaking through a single point,” Maki concluded as she scanned the shelter blueprints.

Unlike last time, they now knew that Ralgwin was capable of supernatural retreat. They wouldn’t have the leisure of trying to siege

his base. They'd need to attack and take control of the situation before Ralgwin and his men had a chance to flee.

"Let's attack from the front or through the lookout post in the back. Factoring in possible formations, the front would be the better choice..." offered Nefilforan as she scanned the blueprints herself.

As far as strategy was concerned, there wasn't much leeway to consider potential casualties. Since they needed a rapid victory, they'd be forced into a frontal assault regardless of the risks involved. Nana, however, had a plan.

"Commander, why don't Maki-san and I pretend to attack from the front?" she asked.

The enemy would be most vigilant about an attack from the front. So if Nana and Maki approached with an illusionary army, the enemy base should rally to defend itself. If the rest of the group struck the rear of the base when that happened, they should be able to claim a swift victory with minimal casualties.

"That's our magician for you. It is a solid plan." Nefilforan felt Nana had the right idea, but the call wasn't hers to make alone. She thus turned to Kiriha. "What do you think?"

"I am largely in agreement," Kiriha replied politely. Though they were both princesses, she couldn't speak to Nefilforan as casually as she did Theia.

"By which you mean there's room for improvement?" Nefilforan asked.

"Attacking from behind will limit the forces we can deploy, so let's have the excess troops attack the front after a delay."

"So we pretend the frontal assault is a diversion while we're actually setting up to attack from both sides?"

"Yes. That should settle things quickly, and considering the possibility of hostages being used against us, I don't want to divide our forces too unevenly."

Kiriha's plan followed Maki's up until the point of entry. Since the back entrance was narrower than the front, it would create a bottleneck in the assault. It was nowhere near large enough to allow them to deploy all of their forces at once, so Kiriha believed it would be better to divide the troops between the entrances and have them work in tandem. It would be an effective attack, and it would be easier to spread out and search for abducted engineers and magicians that way.

"I see. That sounds good, then."

Nefilforan was impressed. Neither her plan nor Nana's had factored in hostages. Kiriha's plan did while also focusing on a balanced distribution of manpower. Nefilforan was quite ready to move forward with it.

“Does anyone have any other opinions?” Koutarou asked.

The room was silent. Everyone believed in Kiriha’s plan.

“May I suggest something?” Harumi asked, raising her hand to share her input. “I’d like to be stationed in the back while Yurika-san is stationed at the front. The rear will need on-demand power, and the front line will need it sustained over time.”

She was carefully considering the position of their magicians, which she believed would play a key role in the fight ahead. Given that Grevanas might be working with Ralgwin, Harumi wanted to ensure each arm of their pincer assault was armed against him. Her idea was to take the rear with Koutarou, while Yurika and Maki took the front.

Just who is this Harumi girl? She can calmly analyze the situation in the face of great threats, and not only that, but she can also freely control Signaltin. It’s hard to believe she’s merely a normal civilian...

Nefilforan had no objection to Harumi’s suggestion. She was simply building off of Kiriha’s plan. Still, Nefilforan found it odd. Sakuraba Harumi was almost too good to be true. She stood by the Blue Knight’s side, yet she was by no means inferior to him. She was almost like the Silver Princess as a commoner.

Hmph... I’m thinking of this like it’s a fairy tale. She is an ally of Lord Veltlion’s, after all. It’s only natural for them to be of like minds.

Their closeness bred a certain degree of similarity between them. Moreover, they both influenced one another. Nefilforan told herself they were just birds of a feather.



The most important element of the attack would be a stealthy approach, meaning the group couldn't march a whole army on Ralgwin's new base. Nefilforan's unit was twenty-five hundred men strong, but they'd only be able to bring about an eighth of that—two companies of 160 troops apiece. Anything more would increase their chances of being discovered.

Moreover, there was the matter of how many soldiers could fit through the base's narrow rear entrance. No good would come from needlessly cramming more men into a choke point. Out of the 320 troops Nefilforan was bringing, only two platoons—or about eighty men—would handle the rear assault from the lookout post. These eighty men were elite soldiers with plenty of experience raiding bases, ships, and space stations. Nefilforan was personally overseeing them, and their list of previous victories together was long. With Nana on their side now too, they were even more powerful than ever.

"Commander, we're in position. As are the following units," Nana reported in hologram form. She'd been sent to join Nefilforan a few months ago. She was the cutest soldier in the unit, but she was firmly established as adjutant.

"I see. Then we'll begin on schedule," Nefilforan replied with a nod.

Raids like this were old hat to the princess. She felt the usual anxiousness she did before any mission, but she wasn't hesitating. Countermeasures for spiritual energy and magic were in place, so all she needed to do was proceed like normal.

"Man, I'm impressed Theia's been able to contain herself for this long," Koutarou remarked with a smile as he listened to Nana and Nefilforan from afar. He knew it was important not to get in the way right now.

Incidentally, Nana was with Theia's assault team at the front of the base. Theia was trigger-happy by nature, so she generally had little patience for the minutiae of strategic plans like this one. Koutarou was sure she was champing at the bit at the moment.

"I'm sure Ruth-san and the others are doing a good job holding her back," Harumi said with a slight smile.

Koutarou, Harumi, Sanae-nee, and Shizuka were the Corona House representatives on the rear entrance team. They'd been chosen for their high concentration of firepower.

"I bet the me over there is pretty irritated too," Sanae-nee threw in.

"And what about you?" Shizuka asked.

"Jeez, I've matured, you know."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

Koutarou and the girls had also been on plenty of similar missions, so while they weren't letting their guard down, they weren't particularly nervous either. At worst, Shizuka felt a little uneasy. She didn't like stealth plans either.

"Oh?" Sanae-nee piped up, the smile suddenly vanishing from her face.

"What is it, Sanae?" Koutarou asked.

"Something's wrong. I can't tell what from this distance, but it's gotten oddly noisy in there."

Sanae was sensing something from inside the base. Between the distance and the spiritual energy tech shielding it, she couldn't exactly tell what the people inside were feeling... but it seemed like there was panic.

"Koutarou, can you tell the me on the front door team—"

"Master!" Ruth cut in over the comms in a near scream. "We've gotten an emergency report from the fleet in orbit! They're under attack by an unknown fleet!"

"What?!"

That was dire news indeed, but it wasn't the end of the alarming updates.

"They've disappeared, Koutarou!" shouted Sanae-nee. "The people inside are gone!"

"Veltlion, I've detected a medium-scale space quake! A large batch of both people and supplies from the base and the lookout post have been moved!" reported Clan over the comms.

Just as Koutarou and company were about to launch their assault, their allied fleet in orbit was attacked. And at virtually the same time, people and resources from the base they were about to strike were removed. Even Koutarou could put together what that meant.

"They're after our fleet! They want to destroy it to strand us here while they return to Forthorthe!"

He and the girls had been convinced that Ralgwin would stick to terrorizing the surface, and their expectations were now being used against them. Ralgwin's true goal was immobilizing the Forthorthian fleet around the planet.

There weren't many spacecraft in orbit around Earth. There were two royal-class battleships, Clan's Hazy Moon and Nefilforan's Hidden Leaves. There was also a fleet of three battleships carrying Forthorthe's delegation. One had been modified for pure transport and wasn't outfitted for combat, so the other two battleships served as its escort. That meant there were four ships in total capable of putting up a fight. That was far more than Ralgwin could handle with his limited resources while stranded on Earth. Even if he tried to break through

them and escape, he'd be doggedly pursued. He was essentially trapped.

At least, that had been the situation until now. But since unraveling the mystery of the Blue Knight's powers, Ralgwin felt the tables had turned. He now believed he could launch a surprise attack on the four Forthorthian ships and emerge from the skirmish victorious. In order for it to work, however, he'd have to use his newest base as a decoy.

"Since we are returning to Forthorthe first, you won't need much in the way of spiritual or magical weapons. With my assistance, you can just easily make them on another planet. Still, to use an entire base as a decoy... Your mind works in frightening ways, Ralgwin-dono," said Grevanas.

The mummified wizard stood on the bridge of Ralgwin's spaceship in a sharp clash of aesthetics. Grevanas, however, was unfazed by the futuristic craft. With his vast mind, he'd already come to understand space and spaceships.

"The base will serve no purpose once we return to Forthorthe anyway, so it's better to get some use out of it. Besides, we were nearly boxed in for good. In a short while, the transfer students from Forthorthe will arrive along with a new fleet of ships to guard them," Ralgwin replied.

The original Forthorthian delegation to Earth had been quite small in order to avoid provoking the Earthlings. If a dozen ships had suddenly appeared in orbit, it would have been considered an invasion. Forthorthe couldn't send more than a handful of ships until friendly relations were established, and that time had come. A large influx of transfer students with security to match were on their way.

"And then an ambush on your part would be impossible. I see... Even if you stayed on Earth to destabilize the situation with Forthorthe, you would eventually find yourself trapped here permanently, and that would spell the end of things for you. You've chosen this strategy with eye on the long game," Grevanas mused.

If Ralgwin stayed on Earth as more and more Forthorthian ships arrived, he would never be able to escape the planet on his own. He would perhaps stand a chance of slipping under the Forthorthians' radar with the help of Grevanas and the Gray Knight, but it would be under far more precarious circumstances than any escape now. Ralgwin was simply playing his cards wisely. Remnants of Vandarion's faction were camped out in corners of the Forthorthian galaxy, and there were a few other anti-imperial groups as well. He could meet up with them and reorganize before returning to make his next move on Earth. Its relationship with Forthorthe wouldn't solidify overnight.

"If you'd been around two thousand years ago, Grevanas and

Maxfern might have won,” the Gray Knight remarked.

“Hearing that from you doesn’t make me happy in the slightest,” Ralgwin replied.

“I suppose not.”

Even the Gray Knight was impressed by Ralgwin’s exquisite leadership. While his political prowess and knowledge were no match for Maxfern’s or Grevanas’s, his ability to grasp the bigger picture and act accordingly far surpassed theirs. Even outfitted with modern knowledge and equipment, neither Maxfern nor Grevanas would have been able to make it out with the forces Ralgwin had kept intact. The same could be said for the Gray Knight and the resurrected Grevanas. Without Ralgwin, escaping from Earth would be dangerous indeed.

“But this is all I can do,” he said. “Given the difference in troops, not even an ambush will give us the edge we need to win. I’ll be counting on the two of you.”

Ralgwin had held a single battleship and destroyer in reserve all this time, but they were no match for a royal-class ship. He’d been wary of engaging the Hazy Moon even before the Hidden Leaves’ arrival. He feared the difference in power, and now that he understood the true extent of the Blue Knight’s abilities, he knew those fears were well founded. In order to emerge victorious here, Ralgwin would need both the spiritual energy tech he’d gain on Earth and the magical power of the resurrected grand magician.

“This could prove a good opportunity for me as well. Unfortunately, I have no choice but to cooperate,” said the Gray Knight.

“Indeed. I wouldn’t want to owe yet another favor,” agreed Grevanas.

“You two can be a little too candid...” sighed Ralgwin.

Both the Gray Knight and Grevanas were ready for a fight. They had their own ambitions that required Ralgwin’s victory at this stage. In other words, they needed him to win. So even if it was for selfish reasons, they’d be lending him their help.

Ralgwin only had a small fleet, so he refrained from using devices that interfered with teleportation. That kind of technology didn’t exist on Earth, so using it would be like announcing his presence. Thanks to that, Koutarou and the others had managed to reach the Forthorthian fleet in orbit. If they’d taken any longer, however, they could have been in danger. Such jamming would inevitably be employed once the battle began in earnest.

“Her Highness is entering the bridge!” the vice captain announced.

“You can skip the formalities and get to reporting!” Clan ordered.

Koutarou and the girls were currently aboard the Hazy Moon. Clan made a beeline for the captain's chair and took a seat. An older man standing beside it, her vice captain, gave her a report in a fluster.

"The enemy launched an attack with high-speed stealth missiles which were barely intercepted, but we've yet to locate their ships!"

In the past, Clan hadn't kept a crew on the Hazy Moon, but it was now fully staffed. It was a necessity under the circumstances, though it was also a sign of how she'd come to open up and trust people.

"That's how we were able to get here in one piece! Don't fixate on the bad news, and for goodness' sake, calm down!"

"P-Pardon me, Your Highness."

Clan was acting like the captain she was revered as aboard her ship, including keeping an eye out for the subordinates around her. Right now, there wasn't a shadow of the immature girl she'd been when she first came to Earth.

With a gleeful smile, Sanae-nee stepped in front of Koutarou as he was looking over at Clan. "I bet you don't know what to do with yourself now that she's not as much of a handful to deal with," she teased.

"I guess."

"Oh? So you admit it?"

"There's no point in hiding stuff like that from you, and now's not the time. So, how are things looking?"

"Fair. Now... I can feel the presence of people, but I'm not sure where it's coming from. I think *he's* getting in the way."

Reading Koutarou's emotions was just a bonus of sorts; Sanae-nee was actually monitoring all of their surroundings with her spirit sight. Unfortunately, however, she'd yet to locate Ralgwin and his forces. They were eluding her by some means. But in spite of that, Sanae-chan remained confident.

"Don't worry! We'll find them lickety-split!"

"That's a bold declaration, Sanae-chan... Are you sure you can do that?" Sanae-san fretted. She had a hard time believing they could do anything that Sanae-nee couldn't.

"We can do it by combining our powers with the haniwas!"

"Behold the power of combining, ho!"

"That does sound strong, ho!"

"Really? I think you're being a little too optimistic here, Sanae-chan..."

"You're just being too negative!"

"Then lend me some of your courage and confidence."

"Nuh-uh."

While they were joking around, the three Sanaes and the two haniwas gathered around and began searching for the enemy together.

“Let’s do this, men! Let’s show them our power!” Sanae-chan cheered.

“...But there’s not a single man among us,” Sanae-san pointed out.

“Oh, hey. I’ve never thought about it, but are the haniwas boys or girls?” Sanae-nee asked.

“We’re haniwas, so it’s not really decided, ho! We’re just us, ho!”

“If we had to say, we’re whatever’s convenient for us at the time, ho!”

The three Sanaes stood to form a triangle with the two haniwas spinning in the center. The Sanaes were acting as a radar while the haniwas were analyzing and organizing the information channeled, like an adapter for the Hazy Moon. Their performance far surpassed that of any conventional spiritual energy sensor.

“Where could they be?” Sanae-chan murmured. “Are they hiding?”

“But where? If they fired missiles at us, they can’t be that far...” said Sanae-san.

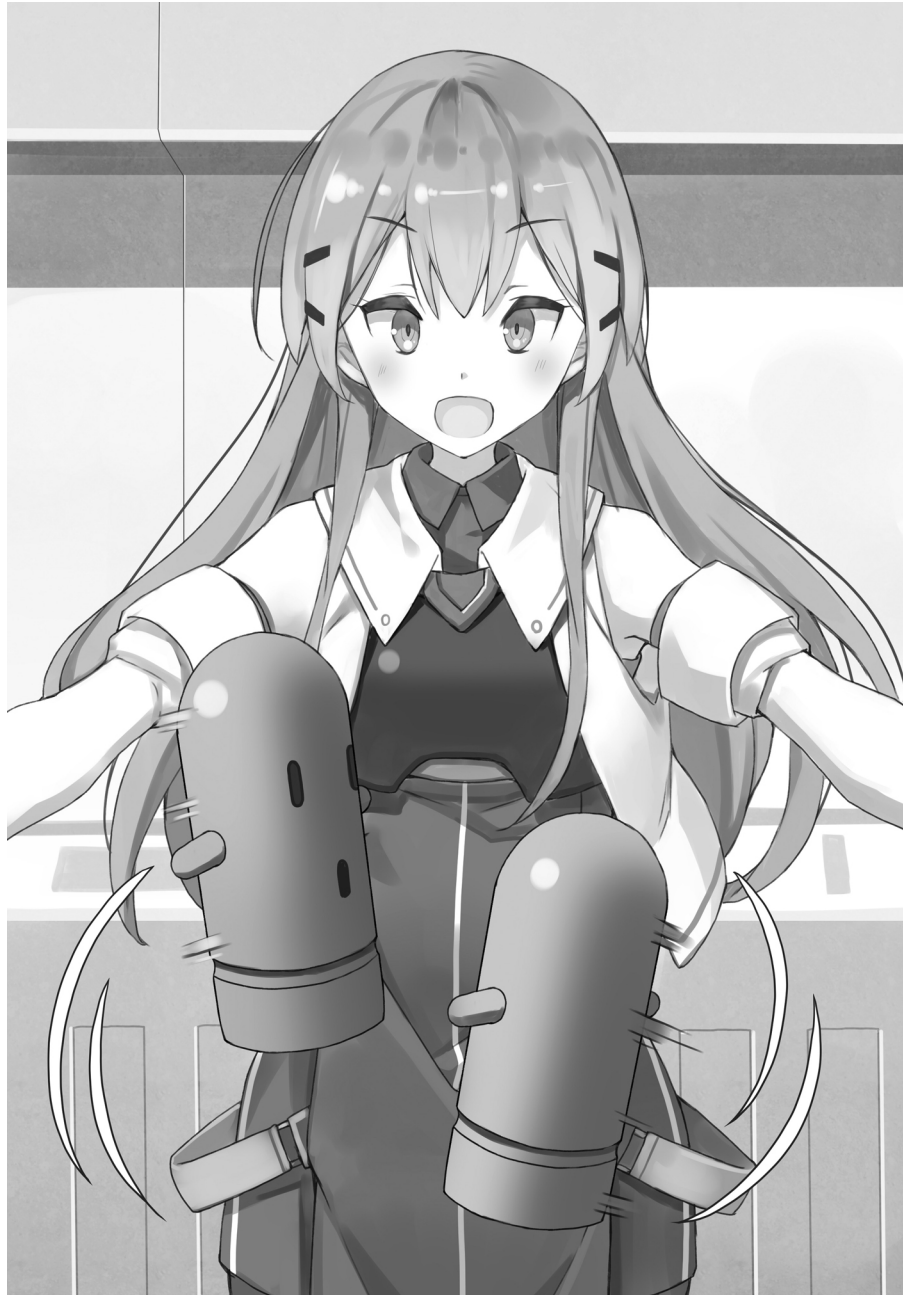
The enemy had to be within the limited firing range of their missiles, but even then, the three Sanaes were unable to find anything. There was practically nothing with spiritual energy in space, meaning there was nowhere to hide from them. Something was fishy.

“We should still be able to sense them when they attack... There!” Sanae-nee called out.

“Hostile battleship approaching. Autumn Water, full speed ahead!” the vice captain ordered.

“They’re coming from below, ho!”

Not long after the Sanaes began their search, two enemy ships suddenly appeared.



The Forthorthians' largely unarmed transport ship, Autumn Water, was positioned with Nefilforan's Hidden Leaves in front of it and Clan's Hazy Moon behind it. Flanking it on either side were the other two battleships. They'd adopted this defensive formation because Autumn Water was currently holding more than military personnel, including diplomats and civilian representatives. They hadn't all had time to evacuate, so protecting Autumn Water was a priority...

And now the enemy had appeared beneath it, which was something of a weak point. Weapons usually positioned to the fore of a ship and propulsion to the aft, meaning the stern was generally less defended than the bow. An approach from dead astern was easy to detect, however, so it was standard practice to close in on an enemy ship at a diagonal. But in this case, the enemy was coming from directly below.

"I'll intercept!" Theia shouted. "What scoundrels, launching such a nasty attack!"

Shipborne fighters existed precisely to thwart such attacks. They were far smaller than the battleships that carried them, making them more maneuverable in service of defending the ship's blind spots. Theia swiftly sortied in one such fighter.

"Please be careful! I'll send unmanned crafts to protect you!" Ruth called.

She'd normally be quick to stop the reckless princess, but not this time. Theia's judgment was on the money, as Kiriha was about to explain.

"Attention all ships! With Earth behind the enemy, restrict your fire to guided missiles only!" she reported over the comms from Hidden Leaves. It would be the key ship of this battle, so she was there to consult with Nefilforan and serve as tactician.

Good job, Kiriha...

At the same time, Kiriha was fulfilling her promise to Sanae-nee. She'd sworn to make sure they were in different places when in danger, and this was likely the first of many such occasions it would be necessary.

"Restricting our methods of attack this way... What a scary guy," Koutarou groaned when he heard Kiriha's report.

Under the circumstances, they wouldn't be able to use their main cannons. They were too powerful and too risky to use with Earth so close. And if they dialed their power back to a safer level, they wouldn't be able to damage the enemy ships. Ralgwin was playing dirty trick after dirty trick to get the upper hand in spite of being outnumbered. He'd used his own base as a diversion in order to set up the ideal conditions for a battle in space, where Koutarou and the girls

were now forced to fight with Earth as collateral. This battle was vastly different from the war against Maxfern and Grevanas thousands of years ago, but it was fundamentally the same on a sinister level. Ralgwin was jeopardizing innocent people to achieve his goals. That much was the same.

“Something’s strange, Satomi-kun,” Maki remarked, tilting her head as she watched Theia dance among the missile fire.

“What is it?” he asked.

“They’ve made it so our only recourse is missiles... But why?”

The enemy’s proximity to Earth would prevent Koutarou and the girls from attacking with beams or lasers, but why hadn’t they done anything to defend themselves from missiles too? Ralgwin had spiritual energy tech and magic at his disposal now. There were even Forthorthian means to counter missiles, so why wasn’t he using them? To Maki, it almost seemed like Ralgwin *wanted* them to attack with missiles. And she had a good point.

“Clan, Sanae, what do you think?!”

Koutarou had a bad feeling. It’d be far too convenient if the meticulous Ralgwin had simply overlooked a missile attack. It was much more likely that he meant to goad Koutarou and the girls into using them. But Ralgwin was also sending a battleship and a destroyer right at them like easy targets... If this was a trap, Koutarou and the girls could be in hot water, but he wasn’t comfortable making that call on his own.

“It’s like they want to see our missiles on full display...” Clan mused. “That must be it!”

“Koutarou, there’s less people than I thought!” Sanae-chan shouted.

“This is weird! It’s like there’s only a few dozen people on board!” Sanae-san clarified.

They want us to use our missiles against a ship with so few people...?

Koutarou had to stop and think about it, but Kiriha, who was listening in as well, gave an immediate order.

“Attention to all ships! Detonate your missiles immediately! Theia-dono, pull back!”

Theia was already on top of the enemy alongside the fighters that had launched with her. The missiles sailing in front of them burst prematurely one after another. Theia and the other fighters veered away to avoid the explosions, passing by the two ships.

“But why?! The enemy is right there!” she shouted.

Theia had instinctively followed Kiriha’s orders, but she wasn’t happy about it. She was still primed to attack and kept her eyes locked on the enemy ships.

“They want us to attack with easy-to-observe means like missiles

and fighters! Those ships aren't what they appear to be!" Kiriha explained.

"Well done..." came an unencrypted message from the ships. "I don't know who your commander is, but they're well learned. Or perhaps it was that lady who realized it, hmm?"

The next moment, the appearance of the two approaching ships changed. They were now common Forthorthian transport ships—ones that had been captured and enchanted to *look* like a battleship and destroyer. When Koutarou saw what they'd almost attacked, a chill ran up his spine. He and the princesses would've had the blood of dozens of citizens on their hands, and footage of the incident no doubt would've been broadcast all over Forthorthe.

"Grevanas..."

Koutarou glared at the mummified man on the three-dimensional screen. He'd never mistake that ugly mug. It was the evil grand wizard Grevanas. When he heard Koutarou mutter his name, a smile crept across the lich's dry lips.

"Yes, I'm glad to be able to speak with you again, Blue Knight. Your homeland is most strange to me, as is this spaceship, so it's nice to see a familiar face."

"I can't say I feel the same."

"Be proud, Blue Knight. You've thwarted yet another one of my plans."

"How about you surrender while you're at it?"

"That sounds fun... But, unfortunately, I have obligations to fulfill. I'll keep you waiting for some time longer."

Koutarou was desperately trying to prolong their discussion in hopes that his allies could trace Grevanas's signal while they talked. He wasn't good at this kind of negotiation, but the situation demanded it. His brain was firing on all cylinders.

"Obligations, huh? To Ralgwin and the Gray Knight?" he asked.

"So you know that much already... Impressive, Blue Knight," remarked a new voice.

It was then that Ralgwin appeared next to Grevanas. As the group had suspected, they were clearly working together.

The Gray Knight's not showing his face, but Ralgwin didn't deny his involvement. So Sanae was right...

The Gray Knight wasn't visible on the monitor. Koutarou could only see Ralgwin and Grevanas standing on a bridge, but he was nonetheless convinced.

"It seems you still haven't located us, however," Ralgwin continued.

"You're using the gates of hell, aren't you?" Koutarou replied. "That's probably why the Gray Knight's not with you."

“So you even know about that, yet you can’t find us? I suppose you and I are finally on equal footing,” Ralgwin laughed fearlessly.

Up until now, Koutarou and the girls had always had an edge over their adversaries, Ralgwin and Vandarion included... But now that advantage was gone. Worse yet, with the whirlpool of chaos on his side, Ralgwin even had a leg up on them. His confidence wasn’t mere hubris.

“That’s what everyone who challenges me says at first,” Koutarou hissed.

“I can imagine. They misjudge themselves and misjudge you, ultimately letting their guard down out of arrogance. No one like that has ever stood a chance against you.”

“And you think you’re different?”

“You’ve already sensed it yourself, haven’t you?! Even if you’re ahead of us, the distance is so small now that we can make up the difference with strategy!”

Ralgwin’s words resounded within Koutarou. In truth, he’d felt it himself. It was difficult to tell with the whirlpool of chaos involved, but regardless of who was actually ahead of whom, the power differential between them now was frightfully small. The slightest mistake by either party would sway the outcome of their fight—as evidenced by the two transport ships that had nearly been destroyed.

“The only question now is how long you can keep protecting everything against us!” Ralgwin laughed.

“I *will* protect it—I promise you that. It’s what I’ve done all this time... and what I’m going to keep doing from now on!”

Koutarou knew how grim the situation was, but he refused to give up. He’d sworn to himself that he never would. Forthorthe, Earth, Folsaria, the underground... He and the girls had staked their lives on defending them, in both the past and present. Koutarou would never abandon that. After all, he was the Blue Knight. He was the legendary hero who led the brave to protect all that was good and precious. Those who fell in battle believed that the Blue Knight would carry their charges in their place, so Koutarou decided to believe the same. He would fight as the Blue Knight until the bitter end.

Battle in Orbit

Wednesday, August 24th

For Ralgwin and Grevanas to contact the group via normal transmission meant that they had to be somewhere within range, and so Ruth and Clan immediately began working together to track down the source of their signal.

“We’ve traced it to one of six possible points of origin, but I’m afraid that’s all we can tell you without knowing what kind of communication system they’re using,” Ruth reported, sharing her findings just seconds after the transmission ended.

There were nearly twenty signal sources within range, and the girls had narrowed it down to six. Without knowing how the signal in question was transmitted, however, they couldn’t narrow it down any further. Laser-based, magical, and spiritual energy comms all worked differently. They might be able to find out more by investigating the six locations, but there was no time for that.

“For them to let us narrow down their location so easily... Could this be another trap?” Clan mused. She was concerned about what their findings might mean.

“The goal of their last attack might have been to make us second guess ourselves,” Kiriha replied. The same thought had crossed her mind.

There was a possibility this was a trap, but there was also a possibility that the enemy was hiding in one of those six locations. So should Koutarou and the girls attack, or should they stay on their guard? After what had just happened, they were racking their brains—which might have been exactly what the enemy wanted. With magic at his disposal now, Ralgwin could play such mind games with Koutarou and the girls.

We’re usually the ones taking advantage of such tactics to pressure our opponent, but now our enemy is capable of doing the same. We need to be careful...

Despite knowing the enemy wanted her to fear them, Kiriha was wary of traps. As a clever tactician herself, she knew all too well the dangers of proceeding recklessly.

“We also can’t spend too long deciding our next move, or they might simply make their exit while we’re doing nothing,” Harumi warned everyone, pointing out a critical aspect of the situation they’d

all missed. A bolt of tension shot through the bridge.

“That might be exactly what they’re after!” Koutarou started to panic.

Ralgwin’s goal was to return to Forthorthe, but if he warped in Earth’s orbit, the Forthorthian fleet could simply follow him. In fact, Clan’s Hazy Moon had sensors to detect the space-time distortions around the planet. If he tried to flee without any countermeasures, he would give himself away immediately. That was why he needed to attack and stall the Forthorthians. He was lying in wait for exactly that... but if Koutarou and the girls never came after him, he could just drift away for a couple of days under the radar, then warp once he was out of detection range. That way, the Forthorthian fleet would have no idea where he went, leaving them in a quandary. Koutarou and the girls needed to find Ralgwin before that happened.

“Curse you, Ralgwin...” Nefilforan said in a stern voice with an equally stern expression. It was a stark change from how she’d looked at the beach a few short days ago.

Nobody was interested in letting Ralgwin get away without a fight, but the prospect of a trap limited how they could move, like a sticky, entangling web. Even though they had the upper hand in terms of technology, Ralgwin had a leg up on them when it came to strategy.

“We have to go after him, Koutarou!” Sanae volunteered, to everyone’s surprise. Since they couldn’t reach a conclusion rationally, she was relying on her sixth sense.

“I think so too,” agreed Sanae-nee. Unlike Sanae, however, she had a logical reason for choosing this plan. “He has the old magician and *him*... All three of them are wicked men! If we let them get ahead now, it’ll all be over for us!”

Ralgwin was already clever on his own, and now he had Grevanas and the Gray Knight at his side. Sanae-nee had her suspicions about Grevanas, but she knew firsthand that the Gray Knight would strike when and where it hurt most. If they let him go now, they would pay for it dearly in the future. They had to take the initiative while they still could.

“But how?!” Koutarou asked. “We don’t know where they are!”

“We and the haniwas can handle this! It’ll be fastest to search out that gray spinning thing he uses!” Sanae declared.

Three Sanaes, two haniwas, and one Koutarou—between the six of them, they might be able to find the whirlpool of chaos. It was a big gamble, and a potentially fatal one at that. It wasn’t Sanae’s first choice of plan by any means, but the situation demanded it. The only question that remained was how to split up and spread out. Given the wide area they needed to search, they’d need multiple crafts for the

job.

“I’ll take this one, I guess?” Sanae-chan said.

She was looking up at a spaceship which, although relatively small, was several times her size. It was the Hazy Moon’s smaller all-purpose ship, the Cradle. Sanae-chan would be using it for the search.

“Please take good care of it,” said Clan.

“That’s the plan,” Sanae replied. “But I can’t promise for the enemy.”

“That’s true. Please take good care of yourself, Sanae.”

“I will!”

Sanae-chan would be taking the Cradle because it was the easiest to handle. It had an excellent onboard AI that was already familiar with Sanae, allowing her to pilot it with simple voice commands.

“Ho! Sanae-san, over here! Ho!”

“Come ride with us, ho!”

“A-All right! Coming!”

The haniwas were beckoning Sanae-san toward a different ship, Ohime. It was a high speed, heavy combat model made specifically for Karama and Korama. It could be used both inside and outside of the atmosphere, and it came armed with a database containing the vast amounts of combat data accumulated by the haniwas over their years of service to the Kurano family. Sanae-san would be boarding it alongside the haniwas. They would focus on piloting while she focused on searching. Ohime also had a spiritual energy amplifier, allowing her to maintain her connection to Sanae-chan.

“And you’ll be taking that?” Koutarou asked Sanae-nee.

“Yeah,” she replied. “This is what I came in, so I know how to control it. It also has a device to amplify spiritual energy.”

The third Sanae would be riding in a pale purple ship only a few meters long—even smaller than a standard fighter. This was the craft that Sanae-nee had crossed dimensions in, so she already knew how to pilot it. The Clan from her world had designed it, so it had a lot of convenient functions built in. Under the circumstances, it was the best choice for Sanae-nee.

“What about you, Koutarou?” she asked.

“I’m taking this,” he replied.

“A giant robot?!”

“I don’t think it’s *that* giant.”

“Yeah. Kinda disappointing.”

“Heh. Elexis would cry if he could hear you now.”

With a chuckle, Koutarou parted ways with Sanae-nee and approached the not-so-giant robot in question. Ruth was standing in front of it, tapping away on a control panel. She was giving the robot one last inspection before deployment.

“I never thought I’d be using this...” Koutarou sighed.

“I never did either,” Ruth agreed.

She stopped her work and looked up with Koutarou at the robot—Warlord III. This was the humanoid mobile weapon Elexis had once used with great efficiency against Koutarou. After buying out DKI, however, Koutarou had taken possession of the machine and it was now sitting in the Hazy Moon’s hangar.

“I’m glad that we prepared it just in case. I’ve adjusted the system so that it works just like your maneuver suit,” explained Ruth.

“For a just-in-case unit, I’m impressed you went to the trouble of swapping out the equipment and painting it,” Koutarou replied.

Its current design was wildly different from the Warlord III that Koutarou remembered. First and foremost, it was now the same bright blue as Koutarou’s signature mail. Elexis had used different colors depending on the situation. For a military weapon, adapting to the surroundings was critical camouflage—and Koutarou had never seen Warlord such an eye-catching shade.

Not only that, but the silhouette of the robot was now different too. Elexis had made the machine quite angular to suit his own tastes, but it now sported sleeker traditional armor. Similarly, its arsenal had been swapped out too. Elexis had used all manner of tricky weapons to try to get the better of Koutarou, from a massive axe, to a shotgun, to a net gun. Those had all been replaced in favor of a large knight’s sword and matching shield. Warlord also now had a weapon carrier on its back styled something like a cape.

In essence, the craft had been redesigned to resemble Theia’s old Blue Knight spaceship. Her and Ruth’s personal preferences had also played a part in the remodel, and the two of them had transformed Warlord III into their ideal weapon for Koutarou.

“W-We just couldn’t let you ride in anything so, um, incomplete... I-I know! This is so anyone can see that you’re on our side!”

“Are you sure this wasn’t just because a certain princess and her retainer liked it?”

“O-Of course! When our soldiers see you in this, morale will skyrocket!”

“Well, I appreciate it.”

With a small smile, Koutarou stepped into the cockpit. In addition to its other upgrades, Warlord III was also now outfitted with spiritual energy technology and magical parts that would be critical in chasing down Ralgwin. Regardless of why the machine had been redesigned, it should prove most useful in the battle to come.

One of Warlord III’s most unique features was its Round Table System, a firing control system that allowed it to coordinate with

nearly allies to ensure that their attacks landed at the same time. Based on the RTS, Ruth had also created a similar system for defending and other actions. The Round Table System wasn't that sophisticated on its own, so it was easier to operate, but for this fight, it was being used to share radar and spiritual energy sensor data with the haniwas. Once they'd processed it, they would relay their results to each ship via the Round Table System to help determine the group's next course of action.

"Let's try over here next," Koutarou suggested.

"I feel like we're getting closer," Sanae-chan muttered, her expression grave.

Koutarou and the rest of the search team were currently scouring space around Earth for Ralgwin. There typically wasn't any spiritual energy in space, although a certain amount of it radiated from the planet. It wasn't much, and it spread out evenly—both important features. There was no white noise to hide amongst, and any disturbance in the smooth aura of the planet was cause for investigation. Koutarou and the Sanaes were systematically checking each and every one with their psychic powers. It was slow going.

"There's no rush, Sanae," Koutarou assured her. "We'll find them eventually."

"Missions like this afford you a window into your own weaknesses. Don't let your youthful energy get the better of you," said Theia over the transceiver.

This prompted Koutarou to look up a little, for overhead was the red fighter Theia was piloting. Since Warlord III wasn't built for long-range flight, she was towing Koutarou along for the search. Of course, she was also there as backup in the event anything happened.

"Kiriha's probably on the money," Theia continued. "I'll bet they're trying to make their way around Earth and escape."

Koutarou and the girls were conducting their search based on Kiriha's advice. Going location by location had its disadvantages, but it was all they could do under the circumstances. Space was simply far too vast to search thoroughly without any kind of a lead. So, to narrow things down, Kiriha had made a few predictions.

Trying to disguise two transport ships with Forthorthian technology would take too much time and cost too much. It was hard to imagine that Ralgwin had had the resources for it while isolated on Earth. That meant he was more likely to choose magical means, which meant that Grevanas couldn't be far. Not even a grand wizard like him could cast such a disguise across such a massive distance for an extended period of time. He'd likely cast a spell on the transport ships before sending them out.

Following that, Ralgwin's forces had used stealth devices to

conceal themselves (and the whirlpool of chaos to hide any traces of spiritual energy). The hitch was that they couldn't use propulsion while in hiding. As there were no other battleships using propulsion around Earth, the energy they gave off would immediately be detected.

This also factored into their decision to use the planet as a shield. If Koutarou and the girls had fallen for their earlier trap and destroyed the transport ships, then that would've been that. But, in the present scenario where they'd avoided it, there were two potential outcomes. Either Koutarou and the girls would quickly find Ralgwin and attack to stall him, or they would take long enough that Ralgwin could quietly drift away from them. Ralgwin would have loved to flee the scene immediately, but without propulsion, he'd instead have to orbit the planet. Once he reached the other side of Earth, he could finally break free and escape, for even with Forthorthe's advanced technology, it was impossible to detect a ship through a planet.

Thus Koutarou and the girls were making their way around themselves in pursuit. With a few reservations, Koutarou believed that Kiriha was most likely right.

"Huh? Something's wrong!" the usually reserved Sanae cried out.

"What is it?" Koutarou called, alarmed.

"It suddenly feels like there's a mist all around us! Can you feel it, Sanae-chan?!"

"Yeah! It's all vague and stuff!"

Though they described it differently, both Sanaes felt the same thing. They'd been sensing a particular shade of spiritual energy out in space, and that color was now blurring like water was causing it to run and bleed.

"It's the Gray Knight!" Sanae-nee shouted. "He's using the spinning thing to make everything fuzzy!"

The blurring of boundaries was intrinsic to the nature of the whirlpool of chaos. In much the same way the resurrection process had warped Grevenas's personality, the whirlpool warped spiritual energy.

"If that's the gate, then we can fight back! Sakuraba-senpai!" Koutarou called out.

"Yes!" Harumi's voice came not from the transceiver, but through Koutarou's silver sword. "*Shine, Signaltin! Show Satomi-kun the way!*"

At Harumi's command, the giant sword in Warlord III's hand began glowing. Signaltin was currently stored inside of it. This allowed Koutarou to wield Signaltin's power even while piloting the robot. It also helped Harumi from a magical perspective, as it made it easier for her to visualize her spells.

"How's this?!" Koutarou shouted.

His armor channeled commands to Warlord III, which raised its sword exactly as Koutarou had gestured. The sword then began glowing brighter, a reflection of Harumi's own will. There was no sound in space, but Koutarou and the Sanaes could feel the faint spiritual aura around them vibrating with the incredible power Koutarou was emitting. When he swung his sword down, there was a bright flash. Signalin's brilliant energy clashed with the dark traces of the whirlpool, each annihilating each other. The light shot forward through space like a thunderbolt for hundreds of meters.

When it dissipated, all three Sanaes shouted out in unison, "Found them!"

They could sense Ralgwin and his forces a few kilometers ahead. Despite the obstructions in the way, there were no other living beings in space, so it was impossible to fool the psychic powers of the three Sanaes and the haniwas. They relayed their discovery to the others via the crests on their foreheads.

"Good job, Sanae!" Theia was the first to take action. She turned her laser cannon in the direction of the presences that had been discovered.

"Don't fire yet!" Koutarou ordered.

"I know, so get to it already!"

"Sakuraba-sen—"

"Take this!"

The instant Harumi cast a spell on Theia's laser cannon via Signalin, the princess fired. They might not have connected if the crests on their foreheads hadn't conveyed their intentions to one another. Nevertheless, Theia's laser canon instantly found its target.

"Tch, so you found us!" The group could hear Ralgwin clicking his tongue over their transceivers.

Then, a space battleship appeared from nowhere. Theia had fired a low-powered shot that barely did any damage. It was simply a means to deliver Harumi's dispelling magic several kilometers away. That was what had revealed Ralgwin's ship.

"Koutarou, the old wizard's not here!" Sanae-nee hurriedly reported. Now that the glamor spell had been lifted, she could clearly sense the presences of the people inside... and Grevanas wasn't among them.

"He's not?!"

Ralgwin had a battleship and a destroyer, but the battleship was the only craft in sight. The destroyer was nowhere to be found.

"Hahahaha, you're too late!" Ralgwin laughed scornfully.

"It seems you don't understand how to use magic..." a dry voice cut in.

It was Grevanas, who was aboard the destroyer. Said destroyer

opened fire, hitting Autumn Water directly in the side with its beam cannons. The enemy destroyer was actually some distance back, hiding in the shadow of the two dummy transport ships. The plan had always been to lure Koutarou and his allies who could detect it away from the ship.

“Master, Autumn Water has been hit! Its warp drive is inoperable, but it can still maneuver normally without trouble!”

Autumn Water’s crew had been caught completely off guard by the sudden assault. They’d scrambled to activate their barrier, but they were unable to divert the beam at such a bad angle. It resulted in a serious blow to their engine compartment.

“Were there any casualties?!” Koutarou asked.

“Don’t worry! Everyone was able to evacuate!” Clan reported.

Fortunately, the ship’s warp drive was the only fatality. The civilians had already been evacuated, and there was no damage to the normal engines. For the time being, they’d avoided the worst possible outcome.

“So the two transporters were there to hide the destroyer...” Koutarou muttered.

“Indeed,” Ralgwin replied. “Humans are so quick to stop paying attention to their surroundings when something catches their attention. You could call it a mental blind spot—the perfect hiding place.”

By disguising the two transporters as a battleship and destroyer, Ralgwin’s forces had taken the heat off of their real destroyer. Koutarou and the girls had had every reason to believe Ralgwin was attempting to flee, so they’d unwittingly been chasing only his battleship all this time.

“You’ll need more than that to defeat us, Ralgwin.”

“I can imagine. I’d need a plan to overcome this difference in firepower.”

“So you’ve already got one in place, do you?”

“Most battles are decided before forces ever sortie.”

Koutarou and the others had finally managed to find Ralgwin and bring him out of hiding, yet everything up until this point told them that the fight ahead wouldn’t be an easy one. They outnumbered Ralgwin’s forces two to one, but there was no guarantee of victory.

The moment Autumn Water was hit, Nefilforan began her counterattack. She ordered the struck ship to fall back as she ordered Hidden Leaves and the other battleships to return fire.

“All ships, initiate automatic laser bombardment! Don’t use any other weapons! Avoid manual targeting too! Don’t put one scratch on those transport ships!”

With Grevanas's destroyer hiding behind the transport ships, beam cannons and missiles were out of the question. The only safe means of attack was laser cannons, which were capable of making pinpoint attacks. The drawback was that they could only hit targets within line of sight. But more importantly, to lasers' credit, Nefilforan could immediately cease fire if the transport ships got in the way—something untrue of beam fire and missiles.

"Ah, so they can hit anything they see. I've heard of these light-based weapons before... How incredible to see them in action."

Nefilforan was threading laser strikes through the two transport ships to hit the destroyer, although her bombardment wasn't doing much damage. The destroyer wasn't easy prey. It was only exposing enough of itself to attack, and it strategically had its exposed parts shielded by a distortion field—one that was particularly sturdy since it only needed to cover a small area. Not even battleship-caliber laser cannons could easily penetrate it.

"Such things didn't exist in our time. Absolutely fascinating... Now, let's try returning fire."

Grevanas trembled with excitement over the new technology at his fingertips and tried firing back with the same weapons. There was no need for that, but he wanted to see what it could do for himself.

"I see. So this light-based weapon is incredibly easy to use but consumes a great deal of energy. It can't be used in quick succession, so planning your attacks against your energy stores is key... And the Blue Knight kept several such fantastic weapons in secret. Our ignorance cost us dearly. It's no wonder we couldn't defeat him."

Grevanas repeatedly fired the laser cannons as he let modern science soak into his brain. Slowly but surely, he was overcoming a former weakness.

Ever since she'd spotted the destroyer alone, Kiriha had been racking her brain. Yet, think as she might, she kept hitting a wall. Grevanas was a mystery to her. She knew he was a powerful foe, but there were too many unknowns... and leaving those unaddressed would surely spell defeat.

Does Grevanas think he can beat us with one destroyer and his magic? Or does he mean to hold out until Ralgwin appears with reinforcements? Just what is he planning...?

"Maki, what kind of magician is Grevanas?" she asked, turning to the magical girl for help.

"Grevanas is a pure magician. But his magic isn't his most frightening weapon—it's his rich experience and knowledge."

Grevanas was a grand wizard from the days of old, but his mind was his most dangerous asset. He knew exactly how to use his magic

to maximum effect against his enemies. That was how he'd been able to get the better of even Alunaya, despite their vast difference in outright power. Grevanas believed that, with all the strategy magic afforded, there was no need to fight head-on. In that sense, he was the polar opposite of Dark Crimson.

"So his strength lies in his intelligence..." Kiriha said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Maki agreed. "He's similar to Nana-san in that regard."

In terms of sheer mana, Nana didn't stand out among the archwizards of Rainbow Heart. It was her inborn talent and keen ability to use her resources wisely that made her so formidable. While Grevanas wasn't cut from the same prodigious cloth Nana was, he had more than enough experience to make up for it. Maki knew how both fought, and she believed that he was every bit as dangerous as Nana had been in her prime.

Shizuka, standing next to Maki, was lightly stretching as she stared at Grevanas's destroyer. "And now he's a monster with a monstrous amount of mana," she sighed.

Based on her experience, pure magicians were hard to deal with. She never knew what they might do or how to engage them in battle. Shizuka had fought Dark Orange in the past, and it had taught her to be careful. She didn't like fighting spellcasters.

"Indeed, he's an exceedingly dangerous opponent who will be especially difficult to fight." Maki nodded with a solemn expression.

When he'd fought Koutarou two thousand years ago, Grevanas was venerable—well past his prime both physically and magically. But his age was no longer an issue as a lich. He was now blessed with mana, knowledge, experience, and physical abilities more than worthy of his reputation as a grand wizard. There was no magician his equal in all of Folsaria.

"Even so, showing his face in front of me was a big mistake! I shall crush him to pieces!"

"I know you're angry about Darzakah, Uncle, but you need to stay calm."

"I know. That's why I'm still waiting here patiently."

In terms of mana, Alunaya was second to none, yet that hadn't stopped the evil wizard from subduing the Fire Dragon Emperor in the past. So now that Grevanas's mana stores had exploded, even Alunaya would have to be careful. While he was enraged over what had happened to his friend, he still understood the threat at large.

"In other words, we're basically up against an evil Rainbow Nana..." Kiriha mused darkly.

"You overestimate me," Nana argued. "I wasn't that powerful when I was an archwizard."

"Factoring in your knowledge of modern science, I don't think the

comparison is inapt.”

Kiriha started contemplating how she would handle the situation against Nana in her prime, and with that mental exercise, she began to see a way over the hurdle that had been stumping her. As for the specifics, she'd have to come up with them on the fly. She could tell now that this battle would be a fierce one.

Meanwhile, Koutarou and the search team were struggling with a dilemma of their own: should they stay and fight Ralgwin's battleship, or should they retreat to regroup with the fleet?

“I personally would prefer to engage...” Theia shared, skillfully piloting her fighter to dodge missiles as she spoke. The enemy wasn't giving them time to deliberate. Given the storm of fire they were taking, she realized that Ralgwin seriously meant to finish them off. “But it would be best to retreat. They want to take us out here and now, and we have no reason to play along.”

If Ralgwin disappeared again, Koutarou and the search team would have to spread out to find him. From there, he could easily pick them off one by one. Theia was desperate for a fight, but she believed it was best to hold out in order to secure their odds of victory.

“The question is if we can safely make it back to the fleet under fire from the rear,” Koutarou muttered. He'd had the same thought Theia had.

If they challenged Ralgwin to a fight here and now, they wouldn't win. Their only option for the time being was to retreat—a dangerous prospect with no rearguard. They'd be shooting behind them with small crafts while it was open season for Ralgwin in his battleship. A reckless retreat like that would mean heavy losses. The difference in firepower alone was enough to send chills down Koutarou's spine.

“We'll just have to hide!” Sanae-chan offered.

“I agree with Sanae-chan for once,” Sanae-san concurred.

Her idea was to have Harumi cast magic on them via Signaltin, and use Ohime's stealth mode to conceal their spiritual presences. She felt that was the safest way to escape Ralgwin—a surprisingly level-headed plan for Sanae.

“What do you think?” Koutarou asked Sanae-nee.

“That would work until *he* shows up.”

The third Sanae was still on guard for the Gray Knight. While they could hide with magic and spiritual energy, they wouldn't be able to escape his powers of chaos. She'd been victim to it once before, and the experience had left her wary.

“So there's no way to hide for sure— Whoa, that was a close one!” yelled Theia.

“They're just going to wear us down at this rate,” sighed

Koutarou. “We need to do something bold.”

“W-We should have brought Kiriha with us!”

Missiles, lasers, and beams were flying all around the search team. The skill of each pilot had kept them safe so far, but they had no opportunity to counterattack. And if they turned to retreat, the danger would only increase—tenfold if the Gray Knight showed up. Still, they couldn’t just sit here forever. They’d be forced to make a decision in spite of the risks.

Kiriha was officially aboard Nefilforan’s Hidden Leaves as a strategist. Nefilforan was still captain, but as she had no experience with magic or spiritual energy technology, she was largely deferring to Kiriha. It wasn’t a bad arrangement for Nefilforan, however. Though she was a princess, she’d climbed the military ranks in earnest. She had far more experience leading forces on the ground than fleets in space. That was why when Grevanas began his attack, she didn’t hesitate to put Kiriha in charge of the battle so she could focus on commanding her own ship.

“Hmm... If memory serves, this worked against you before,” Grevanas muttered.

His first play was exceedingly simple—he advanced his destroyer. In space warfare, lasers were the first weapons to be deployed. Since they were light-based, they were exceptionally accurate even at long distances in the vacuum of space. They couldn’t be fired rapidly, however, and they were considerably less powerful than other alternatives. Moreover, they were easily blocked with distortion fields. Because of that, Grevanas wanted to get closer to deploy beam cannons and missiles. In other words, he was approaching with the specific intent to use heavier firepower.

Normally, that was no easy feat in space combat. The basic principle of space-based warfare was to keep in the enemy’s blind spot without letting them get too close. There was no way Nefilforan and Kiriha would simply let Grevanas move into an optimal position against them. He only had one destroyer, so he would be easy to keep at bay. In terms of range, their battleship outperformed him. Yet nevertheless, Grevanas was boldly advancing toward them from the front... and Kiriha was unable to order an attack.

“I thought you’d do that,” Kiriha said with a stiff expression. She’d anticipated Grevanas’s move, but she was still unhappy about it.

“It’s only obvious, isn’t it? I’m not bound to the same principles you are,” he replied.

Grevanas was advancing with the two transport ships as a shield. That was why Kiriha couldn’t attack. It’d be unthinkable. Though war seemed home to every horror imaginable, there were still universal rules of engagement in place to prevent the worst of tragedies. They

differed slightly between Earth and Forthorthe, but using civilians as a shield was forbidden by both sides.

“You’re inhuman!” Nefilforan spat as she glared at the destroyer, though very little of it was even visible behind the two transport ships. A proud daughter of the Glendad family and its military prestige, Nefilforan was appalled by Grevanas’s flagrant disrespect for the rules of combat.

“Quite right you are. A most fitting description. I am indeed no longer human... Hmm, I suppose Maxfern-sama would laugh here. Wahahahahaha!”

When he was still alive, Grevanas likely wouldn’t have chosen such a cruel way to protect himself. He was loyal to his close friend, Maxfern, but not heartless. Yet this Grevanas was different. His soul had been warped in the resurrection ritual to the point of madness.

“Nefilforan-dono, have all ships spread out horizontally. We’ll never line up a shot clustered together like this,” Kiriha instructed.

“All ships, deploy horizontally! Keep wide intervals between you!” Nefilforan so ordered. She then added a command of her own. “Moreover, all ships are free to deploy fighters at their own discretion! Pin that destroyer down!”

When comparing a destroyer to a battleship, its only advantage was its mobility. Deploying fighters against it would thus be the best way to counter that advantage. Following Nefilforan’s orders, every ship alongside Autumn Water began deploying smaller crafts. The fighter squadron then approached the destroyer and two transports, surrounding them in a spherical formation.

“This three-dimensional battlefield is interesting, but rather annoying. Still, I suppose I can’t be twiddling my thumbs...” Grevanas mused.

Then, something odd happened to his destroyer—it suddenly took on the appearance of a transport ship. It then moved into line with the other two transport ships and began swapping positions with them. The confusion was a pressing problem for the fighter squadron, for the last thing they wanted to do was attack the two hostage ships.

“Cease fire!” Kiriha immediately ordered. “An image analysis will be sent to all ships! Do not attack again until you’ve received it!”

“Kiriha-sama, I’m transmitting the data now!” Ruth reported.

Fortunately, the two of them were quickly able to come up with a countermeasure against Grevanas’s nefarious plan. By reviewing video footage, they tracked the destroyer by following its movement. A marker was then relayed to the fighters to identify the fake transport ship.

“My word... A memory more advanced than a human’s, an accurate review of that information, and the ability to share it

instantly. What incredible depth and breadth, not to mention speed! How wonderful!”

With the three ships constantly swapping positions, missile fire and beam attacks were out of the question, but the fighter squadron began hammering away at Grevanas’s disguised destroyer with lasers. It was shielding itself with its distortion field, but that wouldn’t hold up forever. Still, Grevanas’s confidence didn’t waver... and the reason for that soon became clear.

“This is transport ship Sea Scale to the Forthorthian Imperial Army! Please cease your assault immediately! You’re shooting us!”

The fighters were supposed to be shooting Grevanas’s destroyer, yet the captain of one of the transport ships was now begging them to stop.

Koutarou and the search party chose to retreat and regroup with the rest of the ships, but Ralgwin wasn’t about to let them get away. He unleashed a full assault, firing his weapons and deploying his fighters to give chase. He had Koutarou and the girls pinned in place, unable to flee.

“Hahahaha, this is what happens once the playing field has been leveled! You never had greater skill—only greater technology!” Ralgwin cackled.

“I never thought ignoring the rules would make such a difference!” Koutarou scoffed.

Elaxis, too, had had tools of science, spiritual energy, and magic at his disposal. Still, he abided by the rules of war. His goal had been to end the imperial regime and allow the return of Folsaria, not to hurt the people. In his words, even evil had its own way of blossoming.

Ralgwin, however, was different. He would do whatever it took to destroy the royal families of Forthorthe. He didn’t care about how the flowers grew, so to speak—and this was the man Koutarou and the girls were up against now. He was more powerful and dangerous than any foe they’d ever faced before.

I can’t beat a guy like this while holding back!

Koutarou steeled his resolve and issued a new order to Warlord III, “Activate the Round Table System! Deploy all Motor Knights!”

This was the trump card Theia and Ruth had prepared for Warlord III. It was equipped with an armament carrier that resembled a cloak, which contained six robots known as Motor Knights. Just like the Warlord itself, they were DKI products. They stood about two meters tall and were humanoid in shape, but they’d likewise been remodeled to Theia and Ruth’s tastes.

The Motor Knights launched one after another at Koutarou’s order. They’d been retrofitted for operation in space and modified for

combat; their arms and legs had been replaced with weapons and a large propulsion unit. This made them a little larger than the original units but dramatically increased their mobility and firepower. With the Round Table System, they'd serve as Warlord III's limbs in battle. Koutarou would have preferred to keep this ace up his sleeve a little while longer, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Fully automated weapons were ideal for facilitating a retreat.

"So you've got a new toy, do you? You really think that will save you?!"

"I can only hope... Now go, Motor Knights!"

Elexis had used the Motor Knights like a disciplined army of identical soldiers, but Theia and Ruth had given them each individual roles. There was one for close combat, one for reconnaissance, and so on. They were like a special set of accessories for Warlord III, not unlike Koutarou's GoL.

"Protect Sanae and the others!" he ordered. "You can attack as you please! Just don't aim for the cockpit!"

"As you wish, my lord," the AI responded.

When Koutarou gave the word, the Round Table System initiated. With the close-combat Motor Knight and the high-defense Motor Knight in front, the robots thus began a coordinated assault.

"They're fast!" Ralgwin exclaimed.

"According to our resident genius scientist, a robot's ultimate weakness is the human controlling it," Koutarou explained.

Large crafts like space battleships were one thing, but smaller robots suffered for having human pilots—Koutarou was constantly reminded of this by said resident genius scientist. Humans were at risk of losing consciousness if the acceleration of a vehicle exceeded ten times the gravity of Earth. In order to avoid that, robots had to keep their acceleration below that point or use distortion technology to counter it. The former had the drawback of reducing mobility and the latter increasing the size of the robot. The ideal solution was simply to remove the human pilot, but that left a robot incapable of executing overly complex orders (not so different from how even the most advanced missiles weren't perfectly self-sufficient). Warlord III, however, had a special system to make up for it—the RTS. It was originally designed to overcome defenses via focused attacks, but it could similarly hone robotic mobility and combat potential.

"Ralgwin-sama, the enemy is too fast for us to land an attack!" an enemy soldier reported.

"They're also too small! We don't have any weapons suitable for them!" another shouted.

With the six Motor Knights deployed, the attacks from Ralgwin's ship became disorderly. The Knights were a fraction of the size of any

fighter and flew at several times the speed. An anti-personnel laser would have been the best choice of weapon against them, but neither battleships nor fighters were outfitted with such small guns. All they had were anti-ship and anti-fighter cannons, which, in this situation, was the equivalent of trying to clean one's ears with a spoon.

"We're falling back!" Koutarou shouted.

"See? Our remodel came in handy after all," Theia remarked.

"I am deeply impressed by Your Highness's ever-discerning eye."

"Rightfully so!"

Seeing Ralgwin and his forces thrown for a loop, Koutarou immediately initiated a retreat. While the Motor Knights seemed unbeatable at first, they had a very decisive weakness. In exchange for their high mobility and firepower, they could only operate for a short amount of time before running out of energy. That was a hurdle not even a genius scientist could overcome; it was simply a natural tradeoff. It also meant that if Koutarou and the search team were going to retreat, they needed to act swiftly.

"I'll throw this in for good measure!" Koutarou shouted as they pulled away.

"We'll help too, ho!"

"Activating spiritual energy stealth device, ho!"

Since Ralgwin now had magic and spiritual energy technology, there was a chance he might use them to give chase. With that in mind, Koutarou and the girls used both Signaltin's magic and Ohime's spiritual energy powers to cloak themselves as they fled. Ralgwin looked on in frustration as they disappeared.

"I can't believe we couldn't finish them off..." he sighed bitterly.

"They have the same technology at their disposal. Stalemates are inevitable from time to time," offered the Gray Knight as he appeared by Ralgwin's side.

Unlike Ralgwin, he remained perfectly calm. There were a great many ways to exploit an enemy's weakness with science, magic, and spiritual energy tech all available—and that went for both sides. The Gray Knight was familiar with the power of all three, so he understood that well.

"Now's not the time to be so carefree, Gray!" Ralgwin roared.

"I know. I'll be on my way," the Gray Knight replied.

Their goal here was to kill Koutarou while Grevanas distracted the fleet. That would be a big step toward Ralgwin's anti-Forthorthian agenda. However, letting him get away put Grevanas in serious danger. Not only would it increase the numbers against him, but his methods in this battle were particularly susceptible to the Sanaes' spirit sight.

The Gray Knight knew this and planned to stall, if not outright

kill, Koutarou and the search party. He would've preferred not to deploy so early, but he couldn't afford to lose Grevanas at this stage.

Even though the fleet attacked Grevanas, one of the transport captains was begging them to cease their fire. Kiriha had to wonder if they'd somehow managed to hit the wrong ship.

"Battleship Thunderbolt's combat capabilities have dropped by 30 percent! Whirlwind requires another fifteen seconds to reboot their space distortion field!"

"Autumn Water will only be a liability like this! We'll move forward and act as a shield!"

"Fires have been extinguished in the struck block of the Hazy Moon now! But we can't go on like this, Kii!"

After analyzing recorded footage, Ruth and Clan believed they'd identified Grevanas's disguised destroyer. It was almost impossible to think they were both wrong... Yet when they attacked, they were met with screams begging for mercy. Despite their target lock, they'd hit a different ship.

This doesn't make sense. We must be missing something fundamental... We shouldn't have sent Sanae and the others out so far.

Even Kiriha was puzzled by this turn of events. She was no longer able to distinguish between the three ships, meaning they could only take fire without returning it. There was an illusion concealing the destroyer's attacks, making it impossible to tell where the fire was coming from. Kiriha refused to attack knowing there was a chance of striking the wrong ship. This left the fleet stuck on the defensive, but there was no way a single destroyer could take down multiple battleships easily. Nevertheless, it was toying with them.

The situation isn't good. They totally have the upper hand...

Although he hadn't yet heard from Kiriha and the others, Koutarou could feel something was amiss. It was like Signaltin's power was buzzing. If Signaltin was normally like a clear river flowing silent and strong, it was now like muddy rapids raging and roiling.

It meant that the girls were shaken. Their life force inside the sword was a reflection of their mental states, and given what Koutarou was feeling, he feared even a victory that should ordinarily be within reach might elude them. It had nothing to do with Signaltin. Koutarou was simply worried that the girls wouldn't be able to bring their full power to bear like this. Which was why he decided to do something he normally wouldn't.

"Hey, everyone. You need to calm down."

He called out to the girls through Signaltin, which was connected to the crests on their foreheads via mana. By activating that power, he

was able to speak to them without using words.

“How are we supposed to calm down when things keep changing one after another?!” Shizuka replied in a fluster, also speaking through her mind.

When she did, the image of Grevanas’s destroyer overlaid atop a transport ship flickered through Koutarou’s mind. That gave him a glimpse of just how shaken Shizuka was. The other girls too. It wouldn’t be easy to overcome.

“Whatever the case, if there is a future you wish to reach, you need to get a hold of yourself.”

A second image flickered in Koutarou’s mind. One of the future he himself wished to reach. In that instant, the disturbed flow of power quieted down. While the girls’ perceptions of it differed, he’d shown them each a vision of a beautiful future. It was enough of a shock to completely empty their minds of all other thoughts, even in the heat of battle. It only lasted for a moment, but that was enough. When their gears started turning again, the girls had recovered from their agitated haze and Signaltin’s flow of power was restored.

“We have to win now that you’ve shown us that, Satomi Koutarou!”

“I sure hope so. I’m counting on you over there, Kiriha-san.”

“You can count on us! We’re fighting for something important!”

Kiriha’s mind had been squealing like a rusty sawmill, and it was now churning like a well-oiled machine. Having hostages used against her had paralyzed her thought processes, but she was now seeing aspects of the situation she hadn’t before. Her head was back in the game.

“Of course... I hadn’t considered that.” She swiftly arrived at a possibility that had previously slipped her mind concerning the type of magic Grevanas was using, and she turned to Nana for more information. “Nana, Grevanas was an expert in necromancy and mind manipulation, wasn’t he?”

“Yes... Aha, mind manipulation!” Nana immediately realized the meaning of her question.

Kiriha nodded. “Most likely. Grevanas must be controlling the people on the transport ships to his will, so the captain was forced to relay that message. Our attacks were actually hitting the destroyer after all.”

It was all a trap. They’d previously thought that the transport ships were being controlled remotely, but in truth, the people aboard them were under a spell. The pleading transmission was just part of a ruse to throw off the fleet. Kiriha and the others were terrified of a situation that wasn’t unfolding—all part of the wicked wizard’s scheme.

Koutarou had been worried about Kiriha and the others, but he no longer had the luxury to worry about anyone but himself... for a new enemy had appeared.

"How are they coming straight for us like this?" he asked in disbelief.

"I have no idea," Theia replied. "It's like they can see us."

Koutarou and the search party had left the Motor Knights to stall Ralgwin while they retreated, cloaking themselves with magic and spiritual energy. All had gone smoothly until a gray-painted humanoid mobile weapon accompanied by several fighters had shown up. They'd sortied from Ralgwin's ship and were closing in on Koutarou and the girls at a frightening pace.

"He's coming..." Sanae-nee muttered. "It's *him*."

"You mean that Gray Knight?" Koutarou asked.

"Yeah. Magic and spiritual energy hardly ever work on him."

She knew who the pilot of that gray mobile weapon was. It was the knight in gray armor that she'd fought in her own world. Neither magic nor psychic powers had had much effect against him, and if the same was true of this gray mobile weapon... it had to be him.

"At this rate, they'll catch up before we can reach the others," Koutarou fretted.

"I believe we'll just make it in time," Theia assured him.

"The Motor Knights are almost out of energy."

The Motor Knights were small, mobile, and loaded with enough firepower to threaten larger ships. But in exchange, their operating time was very short. They'd soon be dead in the water, so to speak, which would mean Ralgwin's ship would again turn its full attention on Koutarou and the girls. It seemed, then, that recalling them before that happened and preparing for a fight was the wisest move.

"Hmm, then I suppose we have no choice," said Theia with a grin as she turned her fighter around. She wasn't very fond of running in the first place, so she was happy to get back into the fray.

"Karama, Korama, you can cut the stealth device. Conserve your energy for battle," Koutarou ordered.

"Got it, ho! Stopping stealth device!"

"Opening the gunport for the spiritual energy cannon! Sanae-san, we're counting on you, ho!"

"O-Okay!"

Following Theia's lead, Koutarou and the rest of the search party turned around and released their cloaking. With the enemy nearly upon them, keeping it up would only be a waste of energy. Once it got closer, the gray mobile weapon stopped its approach and opened up a line of communication.

"So you feel like fighting now. Not a bad decision," came a man's

voice in a disinterested tone.

He sounded vaguely familiar to Koutarou, but he couldn't place it and he had no time to dwell on it. The enemy was right in front of him. Letting his guard down for even a moment could be fatal, so he shrugged off his doubts and replied, "We've got our reasons... Are you the Gray Knight that Sanae was talking about?"

Before Koutarou was the same five-meter humanoid mobile weapon that the Imperial Army used. It had no identifying marks, however, and was painted completely gray... yet it had a strange presence to it. Koutarou had an ominous feeling and couldn't tear his eyes away from it.

"That's right. It's a strange flow of events... but this might just be inevitable in the quest for equilibrium," said the Gray Knight.

"What are you talking about?" asked Koutarou.

"It's just nonsense without much meaning. All you need to know is that I'm here to stop you."

The Gray Knight was surrounded by fighters from Ralgwin's ship. Normally their numbers would be nothing to fear, but the Gray Knight himself wasn't to be underestimated.

"So you're just buying time?" Koutarou asked.

"You could say that. Once Ralgwin catches up, things will be a lot simpler."

"Then I'll join you in the nonsense. We need time for the Motor Knights to return as well."

"...The sword of kingship you wield attracts the whirlpool of chaos I use, each annihilating the other. Order and chaos, light and darkness. It's only inevitable that you and I should fight."

"This sword and the whirlpool, huh?"

Now that he was closer, Koutarou could sense the power of the whirlpool of chaos from within the gray mobile weapon. It was the same feeling that had nagged at him in his fight against Vandarion. During that battle, he'd seen for himself the power of his sword and power of the whirlpool clashing. It wasn't hard for him to imagine that they were fated opposites.

Still, he's strangely calm for someone so near the whirlpool...

Everyone Koutarou had fought who used that power was overcome with violent emotions. That intense negativity was what drew out the power of the whirlpool, yet the Gray Knight seemed completely indifferent. His voice was perfectly calm. He was unlike any of the crazed foes Koutarou had had to subdue before.

But his train of thought was interrupted by the whirring of the Motor Knights as they approached. Their arrival signaled the start of the fight. The clock was now counting down. Ralgwin had inevitably given chase when the Motor Knights fell back. Koutarou and the girls

would need to defeat the Gray Knight before he arrived.

“That’s enough chitchat,” announced Koutarou. “Here I come, Gray Knight!”

He drew Warlord III’s sword. A white light poured from it—a white light that slowly took on a multicolored glow.

The rainbow contract is complete, yet the sword is still in Signaltin’s form? Why? Though somewhat taken aback, the Gray Knight drew his own mobile weapon’s blade. *But if it isn’t in its complete state, this is an opportunity for me. This fight is mine, Blue Knight...*

As the Gray Knight glared at Warlord III, the longsword in his mobile weapon’s hands became shrouded in gray energy, like storm clouds had gathered around it. Its very outline began to blur.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way!” he cried. “I shall claim this victory for my own reasons!”

Thus Koutarou and the Gray Knight squared off, their swords at the ready. But, true to form, Theia was the first to make a move.

“Who cares about your reasons?!”

As the Motor Knights returned, she took aim at the Gray Knight. As quick to action as always, she readily squeezed the trigger and fired her laser cannon. It didn’t pack a great deal of power in a single shot, but rather rapidly fired a spray of smaller lasers. It was a form of laser machine gun. Theia fired in a wide spread, making it impossible for the Gray Knight to dodge every laser.

“The same old attack...” he muttered.

“What?!” Theia exclaimed.

For with a single swing of the Gray Knight’s sword, the laser spray disappeared as though it had never existed. Lasers traveled at the speed of light, however, so a fraction of them still made contact. It just wasn’t enough to break through his mobile weapon’s distortion field.

“I’ll take it!” Koutarou shouted.

Not a second later, a beam from somewhere struck the Gray Knight’s back. He’d just deployed his barrier to block Theia’s laser barrage, so a simultaneous beam impact was enough to temporarily overwhelm it. The beam burned into the plating on the back of the gray mobile weapon.

“What a clever application of the RTS...” the Gray Knight remarked.

“I’ve heard all about how strong you are from Sanae. I’ll use any means we have,” Koutarou replied.

The beam had come from the sniper Motor Knight. While it wasn’t a decisive hit, Koutarou had still successfully been able to deal some damage to the Gray Knight using the Round Table System. Sanae-nee was shocked.

Kiriha’s amazing! As long as we know what we’re doing, we can

actually hurt him with something other than Signalin!

In the world she came from, most attacks had proven ineffective against the Gray Knight. Her Clan and Ruth being absorbed by the whirlpool in the early stages of their fight against him had set them back considerably, but their greatest hurdle was their sheer lack of information. But thanks to the intel Sanae-nee had brought with her to this world, Koutarou and the girls here were prepared for the Gray Knight now. Sanae-nee was overcome with relief to see it.

“It’s certainly hard to use the whirlpool’s power when taken by surprise like that...”

“Consider yourself outsmarted, Gray Knight.”

The modified Warlord III and RTS had been prepared as countermeasures against the Gray Knight after a long strategic conference between Kiriha and Maki. Thanks to their previous encounters, they understood that the whirlpool of chaos was activated by emotions. They believed, then, that it would be hard to use if its wielder was caught off guard. That was how they’d come to devise synchronized attacks with the RTS, including hitting the Gray Knight from multiple sides at once.

“Indeed,” he muttered. “It’s clever enough that I think I’ll use it for myself.”

“What?!”

The gray power shrouding his sword rapidly began to swell. The billowing gray cloud split into six clumps that drifted around his mobile weapon.

“Blech! What’s that disgusting stuff?!” Sanae-chan’s expression twisted when she saw them.

The gray clumps had no static form. They were simple, amorphous blobs that changed shape like amoebas as they moved. The part that truly grossed Sanae-chan out, however, was the emotion festering within them. They were entirely revolting to her.

“No need to be so disgusted,” said the Gray Knight. “This is my attempt at replicating RTS and the Motor Knights.”

“I suppose that makes them Chaos Knights, huh?” asked Koutarou.

“Chaos normally has no shape, so forgive their creepy appearance.”

The Chaos Knights oozed around the Gray Knight. It was impossible to tell by looking at them if they were trying to protect him or looking for openings to attack. Either way, they were exceedingly dangerous. The first to realize this was Sanae-nee.

“Koutarou, attack! Don’t let those things do anything!” she screamed.

She’d fought something similar before, and she could see how much energy they contained via her spirit sight. If Koutarou and the

girls wanted to win, they needed to act—and fast. That was why she'd called for an immediate attack.

What...? While the other two Sanaes were occupied with the Chaos Knights, Sanae-san was carefully observing the Gray Knight himself. That's why she noticed something unseen to everyone else. *Did he just react to the name Koutarou for a second?*

She wasn't entirely sure about it herself. He could have simply been reacting to something else. It had only been for the briefest of moments, so it also might have been a mere trick of the eye. But to Sanae-san, it looked like the Gray Knight had turned his attention to Sanae-nee when she'd called out for Koutarou.

“Emergency alert! Spiritual energy levels increasing! An attack is coming, ho!”

“We can't stay still, ho! Sanae-san, take evasive action, ho!”

“R-Right!”

However, she didn't have time to think about it any further. The Gray Knight's four fighters and six Chaos Knights began their assault.

“Theia and I will press the offensive! I want the rest of you to stay back and attack!” Koutarou ordered.

“I'm coming up front too! It's dangerous with just the two of you!” Sanae-chan argued.

“We can't afford to dilute our firepower! I want all three Sanaes attacking together! We're counting on you!” Koutarou rebutted.

“O-Okay, got it!”

“Then let's move out, Theia!”

“Understood!”

Koutarou and Theia advanced to keep the enemy at bay while the three Sanaes held their position to offer supporting fire from the rear line. Koutarou would have preferred a more defensive formation, but with Ralgwin's battleship en route, they needed to get rid of the Gray Knight. It was also impossible to tell how the Chaos Knights might come into play, so he intended to leave holding the front line to Theia and himself.

Advanced magicians could see magical energy, meaning that the wavelength unique to mana was perceivable by human retinas. Once it passed through the lens of the eye, it behaved like light. It was thus possible to see mana from afar using a simple telescope.

“I can't believe modern science loses out to analog tech,” Clan complained. “A digital telescope is completely useless here.”

“Hahaha, I'm sure you'll be able to figure out a way to see mana digitally someday,” Shizuka assured her.

“This large analog telescope means you've already begun researching how, doesn't it?” asked Maki.

“That’s true,” Clan admitted. “I can’t stand losing.”

Shizuka and Maki had just entered the Hazy Moon’s observation deck and immediately swarmed a series of telescopes as large as heavy artillery. Clan had already turned them on, and like cannons, they tracked their targets automatically. Said targets were the three transport ships—one of which was actually Grevanas’s destroyer.

“So, can you see any difference between the ships?” Clan asked.

“Um... can you zoom in some more?” Maki asked in turn.

She watched through the telescope as the three ships periodically swapped places. The Forthorthian fleet was taking fire all the while, resulting in flashes of light here and there near the Hazy Moon. Since the missiles and lasers were only visible after leaving the vicinity of the ship that had fired them, it was impossible to tell where they were actually coming from. Figuring that out was Maki and Shizuka’s job, but the image in the telescope was too small for them to discern any details, so Clan did as Maki asked and increased the magnification.

“Stop there! I can see it! Um, there are differences between spells, but...”

Once the picture was blown up, Maki could make out the three ships. In the fashion of beholding an object from a long distance through a traditional telescope, however, the image was dark. Maki couldn’t make out any details clearly, and neither could Shizuka.

“Clan-san, can’t you make it a little brighter?” Shizuka asked.

“Sadly, no. I could enhance it digitally, but then we’d lose the traces of mana. Their unique light doesn’t register on the digital feed,” Clan lamented, shaking her head.

That was why they hadn’t used a digital telescope in the first place. No camera could capture the specific light of magical energy. By the time the image was digitized, all traces of the mana were gone. The same was true of attempting to modify the image digitally.

“Then let’s try this,” suggested Maki. “Owl Vision!”

“Oh, of course! We could just improve *our* eyesight!” cheered Shizuka.

Maki solved the problem with magical means, casting a spell that granted them night vision as keen as an owl’s—an excellent solution. With that, the girls could see the ships as clear as day.

“Aika-san, that one looks a little different from the other two.”

“Which one?”

Shizuka’s senses were already exceptionally sharp thanks to Alunaya. Maki was sharp herself, but not on Shizuka’s level. She hadn’t yet seen what Shizuka had already noticed.

“Say, Clan-san, is there a way to show others what I’m looking at?” Shizuka asked.

“If you’re fine with an unscientific method,” Clan said with a

frown.

She then focused her energy and touched her forehead. When she did, a glowing orange sword crest appeared. The next moment a black sword crest appeared on Shizuka's forehead, and an indigo one on Maki's. With the link established, they could all see what Shizuka was seeing.

"Nice thinking, Clan-san! Now, Aika-san, take a look at this!"

"Oh, there's only one big ball of mana!"

Maki could see three balls of mana, one for each transport ship. Shizuka, meanwhile, saw one large ball with two clusters of smaller balls. Maki had mistaken those clusters for bigger amalgamations of magical energy.

"What do you make of this, Aika-san?"

"Normally I would think the big one is Grevanas, while the smaller ones are the people being controlled."

As a lich, Grevanas had vast stores of mana. There was also his illusion cloaking the destroyer, but the mana was overlapped by Grevanas's own. That made it difficult to see, much like how a dim light would virtually disappear inside a brighter one.

Then there was the indigo magic controlling the crew of the transport ships. It was the same type of magic that Grevanas had once used to control Alunaya. Humans had no draconic resistance to magic, however, and Grevanas's spell this time wasn't permanent. It didn't use anywhere near as much mana, even with two entire crews in his thrall. Logically, the large ball of mana had to be the destroyer with Grevanas aboard. That was the natural assumption.

"But we've been fooled by jumping to conclusions once before, so I'd like to know more first," cautioned Shizuka. "Can we reach that far with magic?"

"It should be possible with ritual magic. Yurika's here too, so we can probably do it."

"Let's give it a try! Clan-san, can you share what we just learned with Kiriha-san and Ruth-san? And Yurika-chan too."

"Science loses again... Jeez, I'm not a magician, you know?"

Clan used the crest on her forehead to call out to Kiriha and Ruth. Rather than explaining the situation, it was faster to show them what Shizuka had seen directly.



The Gray Knight had his gray mobile weapon, four fighters, and six gray blobs under his control. Meanwhile, Koutarou had Warlord III, Theia's fighter, the three Sanaes' ships, and six Motor Knights at his command. Each side had eleven fighters apiece, so they were evenly matched in terms of numbers. That meant that the gray blobs, largely an unknown, would play a great role in determining the outcome of this fight.

"Damn amoebas! How are they even moving around?!" Theia grumbled as she caught one in her sights and pulled the trigger.

She was using her beam cannon, which was stronger but slower than a laser. In spite of that, however, it should have been impossible to avoid at close range.

"And how are they dodging?! It doesn't make any sense!"

But just before the beam found its target, the gray blob wriggled out of the way by transforming its body. It moved like it had known where the beam would strike from the start. Theia could hardly believe it.

"Theia, that disgusting thing is reading your aura!" Sanae-nee called out. She knew exactly what was happening.

"Those things can read auras?!"

"Your attacks are too accurate, so they're easy to dodge if the enemy is reading you!"

"Tch! Then I'll just have to spread out!"

Theia was a natural when it came to battle. She could hit almost anything she aimed for, but as long as the enemy knew *where* she was aiming, they could avoid her shots. In order to circumvent this, Theia deliberately added a calculation error in her targeting system. That would make it much harder to predict where her attacks would actually land, and subsequently make them much harder to dodge.

"Hey, Sanae-chan," Sanae-san called out to her other self. "Those gray blobs are kind of weird."

"Of course they are. They're creepy," Sanae-chan replied.

"That's not what I mean... It's like the nature of the beam changed after being fired."

"No way! That's like cheating!"

While Theia was trying to hit the gray blobs, Sanae-san and Sanae-chan were observing their special properties from the rear line. The beams they fired consisted of heavy particles—typical of Forthorthian weaponry—but just before they hit, they turned into spiritual energy beams. The Sanaes also saw laser attacks transformed into electric spells, frequently leaving their barriers useless against incoming attacks.

"I can't believe those things are using science, magic, *and* spiritual

energy... Just what are they?"

"Why can't they be less vague?! Jeez!"

Particle-heavy spiritual energy beams, laser-like lightning spells... Either they were transforming as they traveled or they were being altered as they were fired. Regardless, the actual attacks differed from what they appeared to be, making them ambiguous in a way that was difficult to defend against. It all worked in the gray blobs' favor.

"So this is the power of chaos..." Koutarou muttered.

Vague forms and vague attacks. It exerted its influence from moment to moment by shifting unpredictably. As strange as it was, it was like a completely calculated chaos. It was clearly different from the wild power wielded by those who'd been consumed by the whirlpool previously. It all made sense in a curious way.

"That's right. This is the power diametrically opposed to the order you control," said the Gray Knight. "It's mixed. Uncertain. That makes it difficult to control, but its strength is truly overwhelming."

Everyone Koutarou had fought so far under the whirlpool's influence had simply let its power run rampant. Even their control of it had been vague. The Gray Knight, however, was different. It felt like he was controlling the chaos and using its vague nature as a weapon.

"Diametrically opposed...?"

Koutarou looked at Warlord III's sword, inside which lay Signaltn. Koutarou didn't control its power himself. Rather, he accessed it *through* the sword. That thought drew his eyes to his enemy's blade.

"So that sword is the key to your powers too, is it?"

"You're quick on the uptake, I see, Blue Knight. That's what makes me different from everyone you've fought before!"

The gray mobile weapon brandished its weapon. Koutarou winced.

Just like I figured, he's hard to read!

The Gray Knight charged, his sword raised aloft and wavering like a heat haze. This was the raw power of chaos, and it made it incredibly difficult for Koutarou to gauge the blade's range.

"Okay, space distortion field output to maximum! Now, Sakuraba-senpai!"

"Yes! Protect Satomi-kun, Signaltn!"

In his uncertainty, Koutarou had chosen to play defensively. He held out the shield in Warlord III's left hand, doubly protected by his barrier and Signaltn's magic. Altogether, he was sure he could block the Gray Knight's attack and retaliate.

"Not a bad idea!" the Gray Knight cried. "But it's pointless! There's no saving you from this!"

Once the Gray Knight reached Warlord III, he brought his sword

down viciously. There was no special technique involved. He was throwing pure, unadulterated brute strength at Koutarou.

“Tch!”

As expected, Koutarou was able to block the blow... but he wasn’t prepared for the force behind it. The Gray Knight had poured everything into his strike—his mobile weapon’s maximum output, his magic, his spiritual energy, and the power of chaos.

Koutarou was defending himself with nearly as many means, but not at full power. He’d held back some in hopes of making a counterattack. The Gray Knight thus drove him back, denying him his opportunity to strike. Koutarou had hoped to use his shield to help gauge the blurred distance between them, but it ultimately proved fruitless.

“Do you see, Blue Knight?!”

“It’s not like you actually broke through my defenses!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure!”

From there, the Gray Knight attacked in an unexpected way. With his sword still pushing down on Koutarou’s shield, he continued to accelerate forward. The head of his humanoid mobile weapon crashed violently into Warlord III’s. Although they were in space, the sound of the collision echoed through both machines. Moreover, the reverberation made it sound like a large gong had been struck.

“Talk about reckless!”

“I’m not done yet, Blue Knight!”

Since he’d been unprepared for it, Koutarou was more surprised than anything by the unusual attack. The Gray Knight didn’t miss his opportunity to strike again. The collision had pushed the two knights apart somewhat, so he unloaded his machine cannons directly at Koutarou. The rapid-fire bullets scraped the surface of Koutarou’s shield, which he’d raised in response.

“You can’t pro— Wait!” the Gray Knight cried.

“My turn!” Koutarou rallied.

He then switched his boosters to full throttle. He hadn’t lifted his shield to protect himself. He wasn’t concerned about the machine cannon fire. No, he was going for a body slam with his shield. He continued to deflect bullets as he sailed through space, directly into the gray mobile weapon. The Gray Knight, taken by surprise, could do nothing to defend himself.

“Looks like the recklessness is mutual, Blue Knight. To think you’d use your shield to attack while ignoring your own safety...”

Blocking the hail of bullets had merely been a fortunate coincidence. Koutarou’s shield was in the line of fire by sheer happenstance. If the Gray Knight had chosen a different means of attack, Koutarou would have ended up taking serious damage.

“A shield bash is a legitimate attack. If you call yourself a knight, you should know at least that much,” he fussed.

In fact, it was one of the techniques Koutarou had learned from Theia while preparing for the school plays. Traditional Forthorthian tactics incorporated several such shield maneuvers for knights.

“I may be a knight, but you and I have walked different paths,” replied the Gray Knight.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Most modern knights relied on guns. Soldiers that preferred close combat like Koutarou and Nefilforan were in the overwhelming minority. Koutarou found that a little disheartening, but everything changed with the times.

“However, I’m still playing the part of the Blue Knight.”

“Then that’s how you’ll make your curtain call.”

Once they were far enough apart again, both knights readied their swords again. Koutarou used a traditional Forthorthian stance. The Gray Knight’s was rougher, eschewing proper swordsmanship. Their ways of fighting were completely different, but they were still evenly matched somehow. Because of that, nobody could tell how this match would end.

Meanwhile, the Forthorthian fleet had identified Grevanas’s destroyer, but they refrained from attacking just yet. They’d been deceived once already, so Kiriha had decided that it would be better to dispel Gervanas’s illusion first.

“Maki, do you think it would be better to dispel the illusion with ritual magic at this range, or to cast dispel magic on a round of ammunition and fire it?” she asked.

“The latter would be ideal, but I imagine it would be tricky under the circumstances. I think ritual magic would be more reliable.”

The problem was the distance between the fleet and Grevanas’s ship. Magic typically operated on a line of sight basis. The magicians could use the telescopes from before to take aim, but that would be an unrealistically unwieldy process while holding a staff in one hand and tracing a sigil with the other. It would have been one thing on Earth, but across the vast distances of space, accuracy was paramount. They’d need their target to be plainly visible.

There were two ways of getting around this. The first was to use ritual magic to enhance the spellcasting process, and the second was to enchant a weapon capable of being fired across the distance in question. The former required time and materials, but it had virtually no range limitations. In Folsaria, there were records of ritual magic being used to defeat an enemy on another continent.

The latter could score a direct hit, like a magical form of a missile.

It was the technique they'd used to uncover Ralgwin's battleship, but unlike then, there was a chance such an attack might be blocked now. Previously, Ralgwin had been in hiding—meaning he wasn't using any special means to defend himself. That was why Theia had been so quick to snipe him. But Grevanas had a barrier and point defense against lasers. In addition, he could use magic for extra protection. Any sort of indirect attack was likely to fail against him. That was why Maki believed ritual magic would be the safer option, but someone else vehemently objected...

"No way! Absolutely not!"

That was Yurika. She'd already come to the room where the ritual was to take place, but was desperately pleading with Kiriha to abandon the plan.

"Give it up, Yurika," interjected Maki. "You know this is our best bet."

The two magical girls would be handling the ritual together. Harumi used a different style of magic, but more importantly, she'd gone to help Koutarou, so she wasn't present.

"Nobody told me that we would charge right in!" Yurika objected.

Her pleas were interrupted by Nefilforan's voice coming over the loudspeaker. "I repeat! To all members of the Hidden Leaves crew, the ship will now charge the enemy! All hands prepare for hand-to-hand combat!"

Yurika and Maki were currently aboard Hidden Leaves in a large room near the bow of the ship. Nefilforan's ship had a special weapon that other royal-class battleships didn't—a ram. It protruded from the bow of the ship like a spear to pierce enemy ships.

Spaceships in the past had been too heavy to endure ramming attacks, but the development of distortion fields changed that. A ram bolstered by a solid barrier was an attack of peerless strength, capable of piercing all defenses. The inside of the ram was also hollow in order to house soldiers and weapons that could then board an enemy ship through the breach. It was an extraordinarily convenient tactic. A great number of soldiers had already gathered to board the ram, and they were waiting in the very room where Yurika and Maki were arguing.

"Don't be selfish, Yurika! You're just going to make this harder for Satomi-kun!" Maki pleaded with her.

"This isn't any better than the Yurika-on-a-stick plan!"

Yurika was referencing an idea Sanae had once come up with—strapping her to the end of a metal rod to function as a magic wand for the new Blue Knight. It was a simple and effective plan, but one that would put all the burden on poor Yurika.

"If you do this, Yurika-sama, I will assist in creating a fake debt

for you,” offered Ruth.

“Bwuh?!” Yurika’s expression changed when she heard this.

Just the other day, she’d finished paying off her debts to Folsaria. She was now receiving her full pay as an archwizard. In simple terms, she was rolling in it, but this brought her no joy. Quite the opposite. She was terrified of Koutarou finding out and chasing her out of room 106 now that she was no longer destitute. Ruth was suggesting that the royal families of Forthorthe could conjure some new debt on paper so that Yurika could go about her life like nothing was any different—and that was an offer she couldn’t refuse.

“I-I’ll do it...”

Tearfully, Yurika finally caved. She would rather owe Forthorthe the money than risk being discovered by Koutarou, so she agreed to perform the ritual with Maki.

“Kiriha-sama, we’re ready to go!”

“Well done! Nefilforan-dono, please begin the operation!”

Kiriha’s eyes gleamed when she heard Ruth’s report. Convincing the cowardly Yurika to participate had been a tall hurdle, but now that they were past it, they could proceed with the attack. It was finally time to fight back. Aside from the cautious Kiriha, the girls were in high spirits.

“Good! Hidden Leaves, full speed ahead! Our target is the transport ship marked as Grevanas’s destroyer!” Nefilforan gave the order in an accustomed fashion.

Hidden Leaves immediately accelerated, cutting through space. The fleet’s other ships did the same ahead of it, with Hazy Moon in the lead. Kiriha’s plan was to shield Hidden Leaves with the other ships until it could ram.

“Oho, it looks like you’re planning something,” scoffed Grevanas. “I suppose you wouldn’t simply sit there, would you?”

“We’re taking you down this time, grand wizard!”

Kiriha glared at the hologram displaying the progress of the battle as she visualized victory. She was confident. Nevertheless, the enemy was constantly picking holes in her plans and craftily using magic to attack. They needed to proceed with caution.

“Vice Captain. Kiriha-san. I leave things in your hands,” said Nefilforan.

“Good luck, commander.”

“I pray for your fortune, Nefilforan-dono.”

“Thank you both!”

With that, Nefilforan left the bridge. Kiriha would be taking command of the fleet, while Nana would be the acting captain of Hidden Leaves. Nefilforan herself would be leading the boarding party following the ramming. The right person for the right job, so to speak.

“We’re closing in!” Nana called.

“All right, Thunderbolt and Whirlwind, advance! Launch all onboard crafts to counter any resistance!”

As the distance between them shrunk dramatically, both sides scrambled. At such short ranges, missiles and beams would hit fast. It was also easy to deploy fighters. They’d been relying on lasers and long-range missiles thus far, but from here on, it would be an all-out battle.

“So they’re sending out smaller ships, are they? How many of those do we have on board?” Grevanas asked the captain on the bridge of the destroyer. Wise though he was, he’d yet to fully grasp modern technology.

“As this is a destroyer, we only have three,” the captain replied, choosing his words carefully. Though they were allies, he feared Grevanas—both his appearance and his way of fighting. The old wizard was doing the unpredictable at every turn, so the captain felt like he was trapped in a waking nightmare.

“Three, hmm? I can deploy them in the final confrontation,” Grevanas mused. “Have them readied.”

“Sir!”

“We’re closing in on our time limit, so I must use what I can.”

In reality, Grevanas was on thin ice. His opponents had him vastly outgunned, and he’d only been making up for that thus far with magic and dirty tricks. He was confident that his illusion hadn’t been seen through yet, but that didn’t mean he’d be able to defeat the Forthorthian fleet. However, with the enemy approaching, time was of the essence. He needed to find a way to clinch this battle.

At the same time, Kiriha and the others were preparing something of their own.

“Maki, how does it look over there?” she asked.

“The incantation should only take another fifteen seconds. Yurika is working really hard.”

“All right! Then we’re fifteen seconds away from launching our attack!”

“Initiating countdown!” Ruth called out. “Twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight...”

Grevanas continued to attack. The fleet’s two battleships were doing what they could to protect Hidden Leaves by blocking fire from the front, but they weren’t returning fire. They believed they knew which ship was the destroyer at this point, but they couldn’t afford to be wrong. They only needed to hold out for a few more seconds before they knew for certain. Once Yurika and Maki’s spell activated, all would be revealed.

“Three! Two! One! Engage!”

“Ritual Dispel!”

Once Ruth finished the countdown, Yuriika and Maki activated their spell. Hidden Leaves’ ram was wrapped in a yellow glow that shot out from its tip like an arrow of light, piercing space and encompassing the three transport ships. In the blink of an eye, Grevanas’s illusion was gone.

“Hold your fire! Just as we suspected, there’s another layer to this trap!” Kiriha called.

She’d anticipated this much. The transport ship they had pegged for the destroyer turned out to be a transport ship after all. In reality, the ship next to it was actually the destroyer. Without the ritual spell to shatter the illusion, they would have sunk an innocent craft.

“To think you would use ritual magic here... It appears my arrogance has gotten the better of me,” Grevanas remarked.

“Begin the next phase of the attack!” Kiriha ordered.

With the illusion protecting Grevanas’s ship dispelled, it was finally vulnerable. Now was their chance to attack. Hidden Leaves and the two battleships opened fire with all available weapons.

“Not so fast!” Grevanas shouted.

With his mind control over the transport crews still functional, he ordered them to use their ships as shields to defend him. Meanwhile, the destroyer continued its assault... just as Kiriha had predicted.

“Kii, you really are a genius,” Clan muttered, watching in awe as the fire from Hidden Leaves and the two Forthorthian battleships disappeared. It had all been an illusion conjured by Harumi.

“There’s no doubt about it now,” said Kiriha. “That ship is the destroyer.”

“You forced my hand just to confirm that?!” Grevanas shouted.

From nothing, missiles courtesy of Hazy Moon appeared beside the destroyer—except these were the real thing. And now that Grevanas had moved the two transport ships forward to shield him, his flanks were wide open. With his barrier intact, he’d be able to withstand a missile strike. Too bad that wasn’t all that was in store for him.

“All crew prepare for ramming! Brace for impact!”

After skillfully navigating between the transport ships, Hidden Leaves charged the destroyer.

“What?!”

“Goodbye, Grevanas!”

After firing its weapons and using its barrier to block Clan’s missiles, the destroyer was spent. Without any energy to defend itself, there was no resistance it could offer against Nefilforan’s ram.

Though the battle of wits between Kiriha and Grevanas had now reached its conclusion, the skirmish between Koutarou and the Gray Knight showed no sign of ending. They were evenly matched, going tit for tat with each other.

“So Grevanas lost...” the Gray Knight mused.

“And now that they’re free, our fleet’s on the way here,” Koutarou interjected.

“Ralgwin’s battleship will arrive first. Grevanas bought more than enough time to ensure that. You lose, Blue Knight.”

As things stood, their battle would nevertheless be forced to an end soon enough. The Forthorthian fleet was on its way, but Ralgwin would arrive on scene first. He’d then use his superior firepower to destroy Koutarou and the rest of the search party.

“I’ll finish you before then,” Koutarou threatened.

“So you say, but your Motor Knights are nearing their limit, and you’ve only been able to keep up because of them. Once they fall, so will you.”

The Motor Knights were fast, strong, and mobile thanks to the Round Table System. The hitch was that they burned through their energy stores quickly—a natural tradeoff. In realistic terms, greater power meant higher energy consumption. In fact, the energy gauges the RTS was displaying for the Motor Knights were already reading zero. They’d run out of energy already, or they had so little left that the system couldn’t detect it. They were as good as out of commission, and like the Gray Knight said, they were all that had been keeping Koutarou afloat. Defeat seemed inevitable.

“Hahaha, that means this is the end for you, Blue Knight!” Ralgwin hadn’t arrived yet, but his voice reached them over the transceiver. He was convinced of his victory. His plan to divide Koutarou and his friends had paid off.

“Don’t count me out yet!” Koutarou roared.

Waiting for the end would only make things worse, so Koutarou attacked the Gray Knight with Warlord III while he ordered the Motor Knights to attack through the RTS. Only three of the six actually responded; the other three were already spent.

“Damn it! We’ve been played!” Theia hissed.

“But that’s not reason enough to give up!” Sanae-nee rallied. “We have to keep fighting!”

The girls understood the grim situation they were facing. With three Motor Knights down, they would have to make up the difference themselves... even if they wouldn’t last long. They’d effectively been backed into a corner.

“Give up already,” called the Gray Knight. “Or at least that’s what I’d like to say, but you’d never surrender.”

“That’s right! I’m the Blue Knight, after all!”

Koutarou swung his sword, clashing with the Gray Knight’s. The two knights were still matched in terms of skill, but the difference in their allies was starting to show. The Chaos Knights, the gray blobs, were steadily picking off the Motor Knights. By the time the Gray Knight and Koutarou had crossed swords three times, the remaining Motor Knights had all ceased functioning.

“Koutarou!” Sanae-nee cried.

“I’ll come save you as soon as I can!” Theia shouted.

The girls were currently tangling with the Gray Knight’s fighters, which had been enhanced with magic and spiritual energy tech. Theia and Sanae-san could outperform them, but the other two Sanaes were struggling in slower spaceships. They couldn’t afford to spare Koutarou any aid at the moment. Worse yet, after polishing off the Motor Knights, the six gray blobs divided. Three moved for Koutarou and three moved for the girls. They meant to finish things here and now while they were still divided.

“This is as far as you go, Blue Knight. You and your friends put up a good fight.”

“Ugh...”

Even though Koutarou himself sensed defeat was near, he refused to surrender. Continuing to fight was an act of chivalry, and the best he could do to allow the girls to escape. Little did he realize they were fighting for the exact same reason.

“Now let’s end this...”

The Gray Knight raised his sword high. Koutarou did the same, but the Chaos Knights surrounded him. The Gray Knight wasn’t kidding—he meant to end this.

“Don’t worry,” said Theia. “We won’t be long.”

The Gray Knight attacked with the blobby Chaos Knights. Koutarou charged with his sword and shield to stop him. Theia and the others fired guided missiles as cover fire, but each one was shot down by the Chaos Knights. As they’d feared, not having the Motor Knights put them at a huge disadvantage.

“It’s not happening on my watch, Gray Knight!”

“But it’s already happening! You’re—”

And as Koutarou and the Gray Knight clashed swords again, something strange happened... Suddenly, the Gray Knight’s mobile weapon and the four fighters under his command ceased moving. They’d been completely shut down.

“I’ve lost control?! The cameras have stopped working too! Even the backup’s offline! What’s going on?!” With all systems down, the Gray Knight panicked. His voice echoed inside of his mobile weapon.

His emergency communications came alive, however, and

Ralgwin's voice reported to him, "It's a computer virus! It's spreading rapidly over the comms network!"

"What are you doing?! Fix it already!"

"We've been had! I forgot that Princess Clariosa specialized in this kind of attack!"

"Don't be—"

The Gray Knight had lost all ability to fight because of the unexpected virus. Ralgwin could instinctively tell it was Clan's doing. He'd seen records of her breaking into networks during the civil war, though he'd never expected her to be able to pull something like this off without any advanced preparations.

"Good work, Clan! I'll do anything you ask just today!"

Of course, Koutarou wasn't about to let this opportunity slip by him. He swiftly moved to sever the gray mobile weapon's arms and disable the fighters. That left the six Chaos Knights, but without the Gray Knight to command them, they only attacked sporadically with no sign of coordination. It didn't take long for Koutarou and the girls to fell them.

"I've got a lot of questions for you!"

The Gray Knight's mobile weapon was dead in the water. Koutarou intended to capture him and take him back for interrogation. Whether they were from a parallel world or not, he wouldn't stand for Clan and Maki being sucked into the whirlpool of chaos.

"I'm afraid I'll have to pass!" the Gray Knight shouted.

"This is bad, Koutarou!" Sanae-nee warned. "Hurry up and beat him! He's going to get away!"

"What?!"

"You're too late!"

Ultimately, Koutarou failed to capture the Gray Knight. Before he could move in, a dark fog spread out over the gray mobile weapon. And by the time it disappeared, both the Gray Knight and his mobile weapon were gone.

Later, Koutarou and the girls learned that Clan hadn't infiltrated the enemy's network on her own power alone. After Hidden Leaves rammed Grevanas's ship and destroyed it, Clan accessed the transport ships' computers and fortuitously found the security codes necessary to infiltrate the enemy network. She wouldn't have been able to pull off such a stunt otherwise. Rather than an act of carelessness on Ralgwin's part, it felt instead like someone had helped them out.

"Does that mean we have an ally behind enemy lines?" Koutarou asked hesitantly.

"It's too soon to tell," replied Clan, "but at the very least, someone

must not have wanted us to lose.”

Clan didn't know who was responsible for helping them out. At best, she imagined that it was someone with a mutual interest. Ruth, however, had something more specific in mind.

“It's probably somebody very cautious,” she said.

“Cautious how?” Koutarou asked.

“Clan-sama didn't find the access codes on the destroyer, but rather on the transport ships.”

“...Meaning that the betrayal would be harder to detect since the transport ships were being treated as disposable?”

“I think so. It was a very shrewd maneuver. At the same time, whoever did it must be a rather high-ranking member of the enemy organization. They were able to plant the code when the transport ships were seized.”

“A high-ranking official *would* be cagey. There aren't that many of them...”

The security codes must have come from someone in charge of the transport ships or someone close to them. Nobody else would have been able to plant them. That significantly narrowed down the list of potential candidates. Moreover, it was someone who'd planted the codes on the transport ships to keep Ralgwin from finding out.

“Now that parties pertaining to magic and spiritual energy are involved in their cause, perhaps the remnants of Vandarion's faction aren't all on the same page anymore,” hypothesized Clan.

“You mean there's some kind of power struggle?” asked Koutarou.

“Indeed. I find it hard to believe that Grevanas, Ralgwin, and the Gray Knight are really all playing nice with each other.”

“Yeah, you might be onto something.”

Koutarou nodded and then wordlessly began patting Clan's head. She stared up at his face for a moment, then closed her eyes. He continued to stroke her head for a time, neither of them saying anything all the while.

“So, what happened after that?” Koutarou finally asked.

Clan still had her eyes and mouth closed, so Kiriha answered for her. “That part doesn't bode well for us. The enemy clearly made for Forthorthe, but we've lost track of them. Not giving chase immediately has diminished our chances of finding them.”

Right before the destroyer was rammed, Grevanas had disappeared. The Gray Knight, too, had vanished. They'd presumably regrouped aboard Ralgwin's battleship, which had initiated a warp. It would have been easy enough to pursue him in a faster ship, but only the Hazy Moon and Hidden Leaves fit the bill, both of which were damaged from battle. So although Koutarou and the girls had claimed victory today, Ralgwin had still succeeded in escaping.

“By the way, Koutarou,” piped up Theia, “I received an answer from my mother regarding you-know-what.”

“Let’s have it.”

After letting Ralgwin get away, Koutarou had sent a formal petition to Forthorthe for assistance. Because of the long distances involved in intergalactic warping, the margin of error determined exactly how long it would take for an object to arrive at its destination. This was a dangerous game to play with people aboard, as coming out next to a sun or inside a populated area would be disastrous. Clan’s Hazy Moon and Nefilforan’s Hidden Leaves had been too badly damaged to risk the journey immediately. Ralgwin had counted on that, but that didn’t mean Theia would let him go unchecked.

It had still been possible to send a small, inanimate object with relative safety. Even if it didn’t come out in the desired location, she could simply resend it as many times as it took to get it right. She simply needed to keep it from populated areas, which was easy enough with some navigational directives, so the journey was a rather swift one—both there and back. Theia had already received word back from her mother the same way.

“Ohohohoho!” The transmission began with Elfaria laughing, and the video feed showed her holding a folding fan over her mouth. “So you have a request of your beautiful mother-in-law, do you, Layous-sama?”



Koutarou looked at her with a frown. "I still haven't married Theia yet! And now's not the time for games!"

"I can just picture your angry face now. But like it or not, Layous-sama, there's a certain protocol that must be followed under the circumstances." Elfaria flicked her fan toward the screen, looking like she was having the time of her life.

Reluctantly, Koutarou replied, "Please lend us your aid, Your Majesty."

"What have I told you to call me?"

"Please lend us your aid...mom."

"That's better! I shall assist you in any way I can."

"Hey, if you understand how urgent this is, cut the antics already!"

"Ohohohoho!" Elfaria giggled again.

Her cheerful laugh echoed in room 106, where Theia sat in the corner filming Koutarou. Elfaria had instructed her to do so.

"Pardon, Theiamillis-san," Harumi called out to her. "This is a recording, isn't it?"

In response, Theia fixed the camera to a tripod and turned to Harumi. "Yes. It's a few days old by now."

"But it's like they're actually talking... What exactly is going on between the two of them?"

It looked like Koutarou and Elfaria were talking in real time, but that wasn't the case. Elfaria was ten million light years away, so Koutarou was watching a video she'd recorded in advance. She'd simply anticipated everything he would say, which wasn't something just anyone could do. Harumi sensed a deep bond between them.

"I've wondered about her relationship with Koutarou myself."

Harumi wasn't the only one curious about the connection between Elfaria and Koutarou. Theia felt the same way. They would just brush her off if she asked, but it was nevertheless clear that there was something special between them.

"Still... Satomi-kun just said something incredible, didn't he?" Harumi's biggest concern wasn't Koutarou's relationship with Elfaria, but rather what he'd just said to her.

"So he did. Like it was nothing too..."

"I'm pretty sure she asked you to film because she suspected something like this might happen," Clan interjected.

She'd heard it too, and so had all the other girls in room 106. That included Nana and even Nalfa and Kotori. In fact, Theia was using Nalfa's camera.

"Maybe... But he most certainly said he hadn't married you yet, Theiamillis-san."

Koutarou was caught up in his banter with Elfaria's transmission and hadn't fully realized the words that had left his mouth. He also failed to realize that the girls were all staring at him, their eyes glittering with expectation.

Once the transmission ended, a commotion erupted in room 106—as well as one all the way across the universe in Forthorthe for the exact same reason. The cause was a message from Elfaria.

“All riiight! It's finally time to fight!” roared a girl wearing a red and black outfit. This was Dark Crimson, the evil magical girl who'd once been Koutarou and the girls' mortal enemy.

“You look awfully happy, Crimson,” a shorter girl in a green and black outfit remarked bluntly. This was Dark Green, who didn't care for what Elfaria had to say, but she was pleased to see her best friend so excited.

“I've been waiting for this! And we get to fight a legendary grand wizard, no less!”

Indeed, Elfaria had contacted them about a new job. The remnants of Vandarion's faction had acquired magic and spiritual energy on Earth and were headed to Forthorthe. Elfaria wanted the former members of Darkness Rainbow to engage them and, if possible, take them out. Crimson had had it with desk work, so she was raring to go at the prospect of a real mission.

“I don't like this. Liches are disgusting and stinky. The cute factor is a big, fat zero.”

“That's true. I'd prefer to avoid fighting if possible.”

Dark Orange and Dark Yellow were both against it. The cute-obsessed Orange didn't want to get anywhere near Grevanas, who naturally repulsed her. Just the idea of this mission bummed her out. On the other hand, Yellow was conservative by nature and specialized in defensive magic. She simply didn't want to fight if they could help it.

“Where did your guts as leaders of Darkness Rainbow go?!” Crimson bellowed.

“Darkness Rainbow is a thing of the past now.”

“We're court magicians now.”

Dark Purple and Dark Blue, the remaining two members, were neutral about the idea. Dark Purple was mature and composed, and Dark Blue always did things at her own pace. They had trouble seeing the merits of the mission.

“Man, I miss the old days. There was always a fight to be had back then...”

Dark Crimson's shoulders slumped when she realized the majority of her teammates weren't feeling it. Their days of raising hell in

Folsaria were over. Instead, they now served as magicians in service to the royal families of Forthorthe.

“You should be grateful,” said Purple calmly. “You’d be even more bored in prison.”

“That’s true, but still...” Crimson reluctantly agreed.

After the civil war, the girls of Darkness Rainbow had accepted a deal Elfaria brought them. Though they should have been punished severely for their role in the coup, instead, the empress had offered them amnesty in exchange for their service as imperial court magicians. Their crimes were expunged and they were allowed to start life over as Forthorthian citizens. The offer meant a lot to them, as one of their original goals as Darkness Rainbow was to return to their ancestral homeland of Forthorthe. Of course, Elfaria was happy to have them aboard. With the risk of magic being leaked, she wanted Forthorthe to be prepared with a cohort of its own court magicians.

“It’s fine, Crimson. If Orange and the others don’t want to go, you can just defeat them all yourself. Having more enemies just makes you happier, doesn’t it?”

“Now you’re talking, Green! I’m going to go kick some butt!”

“Oh dear,” sighed Purple. “With Maya and Elexis gone, there’s no one left to rein Crimson in...”

Since their interests aligned, Darkness Rainbow had taken the empress’s offer and become Forthorthian court magicians. Though their enthusiasm for the job varied, there was no doubting their ability. They would wield their incredible power to fight against Ralgwin’s forces. They were one of the greatest secret weapons Elfaria had prepared.

Ralgwin had finally uncovered the mysteries of the Blue Knight’s power. He’d even taken those powers for himself, and he was now making his way back to Forthorthe with them in hand.

Immediately following their escape, the Gray Knight visited Ralgwin’s private quarters and made a strange proposal. Ralgwin was unsure what to make of it. He didn’t see a reason to say no, but he also didn’t see the merit in the Gray Knight’s plan. He felt the need to inquire further about his intentions.

“Are you serious?” he asked. “Why do you want to return to Earth now? The girl in question has already appeared, hasn’t she?”

The Gray Knight had proposed that he himself return to Earth alone—Ralgwin just couldn’t understand why. The Gray Knight said that would eventually make for Forthorthe, and that he’d been operating in the shadows on Earth because he was waiting for a certain girl from his world to arrive. But now that Ralgwin and the others were safely en route to Forthorthe, the Gray Knight wanted to

return to Earth.

“Something unexpected has come up,” he explained.

“What do you mean?” Ralgwin asked.

“Regarding the sword of kingship, Signaltin. The rainbow has been completed, yet it isn’t displaying its true strength.”

The Gray Knight was concerned about Koutarou’s sword. He’d seen it shine with the rainbow, yet for some reason, it still looked like Signaltin. With all nine colors, it should have taken the form of the true sword of kingship. He found the fact that it hadn’t rather peculiar.

“And you mean to find out the cause, Gray?”

“That’s right. It might prove to be a thorn in my side later otherwise.”

“So be it, then. I won’t stop you.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Need a ride?”

“No. I’ll take care of it myself.”

With that, the Gray Knight turned his back to Ralgwin as if to say he was done talking. He then made for the exit.

“To think Signaltin is incomplete as it is... I suppose my uncle just never had a chance against the Blue Knight,” said Ralgwin, although the Gray Knight didn’t react. “But I don’t get it. Why doesn’t he try to take the world for himself with all that power?”

Those words, however, stopped the Gray Knight in his tracks.

“I suppose I at least have to acknowledge his chivalry,” Ralgwin continued.

“...He’s just stubborn and cowardly.” The Gray Knight rarely showed any emotion, but just this once, there was clear anger in his voice. Ralgwin didn’t understand what it was directed at.

“That’s convincing coming from you, Gray Knight,” he said.

“That was the whole problem.”

“You know yourself best, I’m sure. After all, you’re the Blue Knight on a different path.”

“...I’ve cast aside that name. As you can see, I’m the Gray Knight now...”

With those final words, the Gray Knight departed Ralgwin’s room. In order to fulfill the dark purpose buried in his heart, he wore blue armor that had turned completely gray.



Afterword

Long time no see. Author Takehaya here. This is volume 38 which, factoring in the two side volumes, is actually the series' fortieth book. Thank you all for the continued support that has made this possible. Additionally, this afterword contains spoilers, so proceed with caution.

As for the content of this volume, the third Sanae finally appears! Sanae is the only one of the original four invaders to just have two feature volumes so far; this is the third. It was gated behind certain developments in the story, so it couldn't come before this, but the spotlight is now gracing her for a third go-around. I'm glad it's finally her time. However, per usual, her story moves along with the main plot, so it will continue beyond this book. There's also the Gray Knight in play, so I can't say for certain, but there should be another volume or two.

Since there's now a third Sanae, I asked for a color illustration of her. Even though it's a third version of the same character, Poco-san did a wonderful job. The image isn't entirely true to the story, though. Even with Sanae-san astral projecting outside of Sanae, it should still *look* like two Sanae-sans. At most, Sanae-chan and Sanae-san might have different haircuts now, but I thought it would be a waste not to see all three versions of her together, so I asked for all three—original Sanae-chan included! It was a case of putting the art before consistency. I hope you can understand. I just wanted to see it (lol)!

At the end of the volume, the Gray Knight's identity is finally revealed. That's right. It's *him*. Once Koutarou gathered all nine colors in his sword, he was bound to come. After billions of loops, it was inevitable that he would appear. They have opposite energies, and they're stronger than ever. Fighting Koutarou was a foregone conclusion in his eyes.

And now that we know who the Gray Knight is, I'm sure you can all understand why the story of volumes 28 and 29 came first. If that story ran parallel to this one, Maki and Clan would be disappearing about now. The girls would slowly vanish, and it would take Koutarou a few volumes to reach the ruins. It really would've drawn things out, and we'd be working with a shrinking cast. Since everyone has their favorite character, it would've been frustrating waiting for them to appear again.

But now we've reached the fortieth volume. Things have proceeded this way with a lot of consideration. *Is it really okay for me to take forty books to reach the conclusion of volume 29? Shouldn't I at least do this first so that characters aren't missing for too long?* All kinds of thoughts ran through my mind, and I ended up deciding to separate the "thematic" end of the story from the ending events of the story in order to tackle the former first. I made that decision around volume 25 or 26. There was a time when I was unsure of how to handle it, as you can go back and read in the afterwords. Back then, I couldn't share that the story could continue for a long time, or of the changes in policy regarding that. That's how things got this complicated.

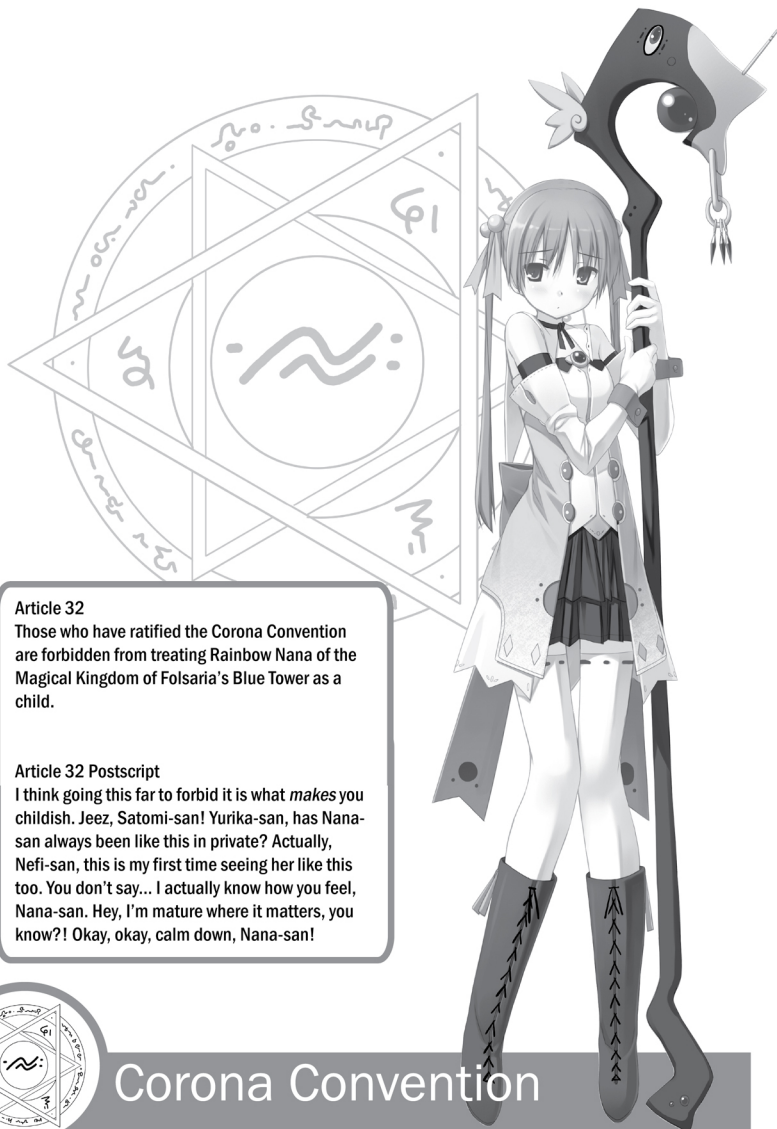
Ultimately, I decided to separate those elements of this long-running story only to rejoin them later, which is how it's turned into what it is now. That was sort of a safety measure I took because I'm not a big-time author and because Hobby Japan is not a major publisher. I couldn't write on the premise that this story would last forever. Several years have passed since then, however, and the ending events have finally caught up to the "thematic" ending. What a relief. I have nothing but gratitude for your support. Thank you all again. I'll keep doing my best from here.

Now let's look toward the next volume. We had a battle in space this time, but the story will move back to the surface in the next installment. Like the Gray Knight said at the end of this volume, he'll be returning to Kisshouharukaze City to uncover why Signaltin isn't displaying its true power. That means there will be a focus on a certain someone in addition to Sanae. Koutarou and the girls will have to deal with that as they prepare to make for Forthorthe. I expect the next volume to hit shelves in November per my usual schedule. Probably. Anyway, please wait until then!

I'm running out of space now, so allow me to conclude with the acknowledgments. Thank you to everyone at the editorial department, to Poco-san for the fantastic artwork of all three Sanaes, and to you readers who've stuck with me for so long.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 39.

June, 2021
Takehaya



Article 32

Those who have ratified the Corona Convention are forbidden from treating Rainbow Nana of the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria's Blue Tower as a child.

Article 32 Postscript

I think going this far to forbid it is what *makes* you childish. Jeez, Satomi-san! Yurika-san, has Nana-san always been like this in private? Actually, Nefi-san, this is my first time seeing her like this too. You don't say... I actually know how you feel, Nana-san. Hey, I'm mature where it matters, you know?! Okay, okay, calm down, Nana-san!



Corona Convention

New! August 30th, 2011

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Elfaria

When Elfaria learned that she'd gotten a message not from Theia or Clan, but from Koutarou personally, a smile bloomed on her face like a flower in spring. And when she realized that his message was only a formal request for aid, said smile wilted with disappointment. She thus began plotting her revenge.

"Oh, that Layous... Couldn't he at least mention how cute I am or how much he wants to see me again? I can't believe he'd just send an aid request like such a stickler!"

Seeing Elfaria complain like a little girl, Ceilēshu couldn't help but smile wryly.

That's not the kind of behavior you'd expect from a son-in-law...

Since Vandarion's coup, Ceilēshu had been serving as an assistant to Elfaria. Today she'd brought her usual regular report to share with the empress over afternoon tea. The problem was its content, as Elfaria's mood soured after reading the message from Earth. It had been several months since Ceilēshu first started this job, and this was the first time she'd ever seen the empress act so childishly.

"What should I do?! This message is so rude to me, the Forthorthian empress!"

"I think it's the other way around..."

Normally calling the empress cute or asking to meet her personally would be crossing a line. Depending on the circumstances, it might even warrant censure. Koutarou had chosen to be decorously formal, and it was the right call. After all, his message would be seen by others—Ceilēshu included. This, however, was precisely what upset Elfaria. Her surprising temper tantrum was most adorable, but Ceilēshu thought it too rude to comment that aloud.

"Is something the matter?" Elfaria asked.

"Oh... I was just thinking about how special Layous-sama must be to Your Majesty."

"But of course. He's a hero of legend, both past and present, not to mention my first love."

The anger suddenly vanished from Elfaria's face as she smiled wistfully. She'd only spent a few days with Koutarou, but it had left a lifelong impression on her.

"So you don't deny that he was your first love..."

"You'd already guessed as much, hadn't you?"

"Well... yes."

"Just so you know, it's top secret."

"Of course. Hahaha..."

The Blue Knight was Forthorthe's guardian and the current empress's first love. He was probably the only person that Elfaria could truly rely on, yet she'd never had many chances to interact with him. Due to her position, she couldn't reveal her feelings for him either. Moreover, her daughter now had feelings for him too. Nevertheless, Elfaria couldn't help her excitement upon hearing from him, nor her disappointment at his message's impersonal contents. As a woman, Ceilēshu understood.

"In that case, I believe an elaborate revenge plot is in order," she suggested.

"I was thinking the exact same thing," Elfaria replied. "Layous-sama needs to learn his place."

"As your lost first love?"

"That's right. And as the man who left me for twenty years."

"If he'd taken you with him, that would have been a big problem in itself."

"I was but a young girl back then! I didn't care!"

"Haha. I suppose not."

Following that, the two royals fervently debated how best to respond to Koutarou's message. How to make a thoughtless boy a little more self-aware. It was a difficult problem, but one they thoroughly enjoyed discussing.

Side: Nana

Nana was once known as a genius magical girl. Her teenage years had been filled with fighting; deadly battles against Darkness Rainbow had been her life. But today, Nana was consulting with Koutarou about a new worry.

"The other day, I was invited to a colleague's wedding," she said.

"So she's quite a bit older than you, huh?" Koutarou asked.

"Yes, I believe she'll be 28 this year. After retiring from active duty, she's settling in with her boyfriend, who was honorably discharged before her due to injury."

"So what's up? Isn't this all good news?"

"It is... except that she told me she'll be waiting for my turn next year."

"You're basically on an honorable discharge yourself, so I think it'd be great if you got married too."

Nana was doing well now with artificial limbs and organs, but

that hadn't been the case until recently. Rainbow Heart still regarded her as retired due to combat injury.

"It just doesn't feel real, you know?" Nana muttered.

"You mean you can't imagine getting married?" Koutarou asked.

"I guess so. I just can't imagine happily living with a man."

Nana's whole life had been centered on her work, so she didn't know what to think of being asked to fall in love and get married. She'd never had any romantic feelings for men when she was younger, and even as they aged, she couldn't see her comrades-in-arms as anything more. For Nana, settling down with one of them was nearly unthinkable.

"Not to mention... I have a complex of sorts," she confessed.

"A complex?" Koutarou asked curiously.

"I hate to admit it, but... I pretty much look like a child, don't I?"

"That's not true. I'd say you're more of a child on the inside."

"Come on!"

"Sorry."

"Anyway... don't you think it's problematic if someone falls for my appearance?"

"Don't ask me. That's a tricky question."

If Koutarou agreed, he'd be saying that Nana looked like a child. And if he disagreed, it'd be like saying he liked her childish appearance. Koutarou couldn't say either, so all he could do was sip his tea and laugh it off.

Nana looked up at him silently, her cheeks puffed out in a pout. She was somewhat unhappy that he was enjoying himself. She took a sip of her own tea and got back to the subject at hand. Understandably, it was a big deal to her.

"I was wondering if anybody would see me for who I am inside..."

Nana was a former genius magical girl. She had a childish appearance and almost half of her body was mechanical. She worried that no one could see past that and love her for who she was.

"I think it's who you are inside that's the problem, though."

"There you go again! You are so insensitive!"

Nana had yet to realize that somebody right next to her saw her that way. Or how comfortable it was to be with him. Or why she'd really come to him in the first place. It would still be some time yet before she put it all together.

Side: Sanae

The bath aboard Clan's Hazy Moon was quite large—several times bigger than the one in room 106. Because of this, the other girls came to use it every now and then. It was more convenient than spending

forever taking turns one by one at the apartment, and it was a fun way to have some girl time together.

“Y-Yay, we won!”

“To think we’d come back with a homerun!”

Sanae-chan and Sanae-san stepped into the bath, gleefully throwing their arms up into the air in celebration. Sanae-nee, however, looked a little puzzled. They’d come to the bath together to bond, but Sanae-chan and Sanae-san had promptly begun shouting when Sanae-nee entered.

“Even if they’re our breasts, can you please not stare?” she asked.

“Sorry.”

“I was just surprised…”

Indeed, they were specifically staring at Sanae-nee’s chest. Her breasts weren’t exactly large, but they looked average. Since Sanae-nee was a little older than the other two Sanaes, they could only assume that they’d grow to be her size eventually. They were overjoyed at the thought. They’d developed a little over the past year, but nothing like Sanae-nee.

“Hey, how did you get ’em so big?!”

“I find it hard to believe *these* are going to turn into *those*!”

After they’d finally stopped cheering, the two Sanaes began excitedly pressing Sanae-nee for answers. As girls, they’d given great thought to their breast size, and if there was a way to enhance it, they wanted to know. Even the more modest Sanae-san’s eyes were sparkling.

“My Kiriha told me,” began Sanae-nee, “that the first step is getting a lot of nutrition.”

“Got it, got it! Nutrition first!”

“It’s true that you have to take good care of your body.”

“Next is working the muscles below your breasts.”

“Your muscles?”

“Yes. If you have a good core, it apparently makes your breasts look better. So we all did muscle training together.”

“Muscle training, huh? I guess we’d have an advantage there,” remarked Sanae-chan.

“Since we can train our muscles with our psychic powers?” asked Sanae-san.

“That’s right!”

“I actually did that too,” said Sanae-nee.

“Did it work?”

“Perfectly.”

“Then let’s get to it!”

With a glint in her eyes, Sanae-san reached out for Sanae-chan’s chest. Sanae-chan was in control of their body right now, but it *did*

belong to both of them.

“Hahahaha, don’t touch me there! It tickles!”

“Deal with it! This is for the sake of our future!”

Since she was working her core muscles, Sanae-san wasn’t touching Sanae-chan’s breasts. Sanae-chan was still ticklish, however, so she couldn’t help laughing.

“Ahahahaha, h-hey, stop!”

“No way!”

“Are you *that* concerned about the size of your breasts?” asked Sanae-nee.

“It’s a point of womanly pride!”

“That’s true.”

“Ahahahaha!”

Sanae-san was being more assertive than usual, so Sanae-chan would be stuck in the tickle trap for a while longer.

By the time Sanae-chan was finally freed, her jaw and stomach hurt from laughing so much. Clutching them both, she scolded Sanae-san. “Y-You know... you really need to learn to hold back.”

“You’re being too soft! You saw those two’s weapons of mass destruction at the beach too, didn’t you, Sanae-chan?!”

By “those two,” Sanae-san meant Kiriha and Nefilforan. Their breasts were so large that they’d looked ready to spill out of their swimsuits. They’d jiggled with every step. Both bounteous and beautiful, they were truly worthy of being called weapons.

“No matter how hard we work, we’ll never be like them.” Sanae-chan looked down at herself, feeling there was no way to surpass the naturally well-endowed.

“Even so, we should make ours as big as we can!”

“Why do you care so much?” Sanae-nee asked, her head cocked to the side. She was puzzled by Sanae-san’s eagerness.

“The problem is when we stand next to Kiriha-san or Nefilforan-san! I could just die imagining what Koutarou thinks when comparing us!”

“What Koutarou thinks...?”

“Comparing us...?”

Sanae-nee and Sanae-chan imagined standing next to Kiriha and Nefilforan, and within seconds, they both changed their tune.

“Right! Let’s make them bigger!”

“I’ll do what I can to help, so help me make mine bigger too!”

“So you finally understand!”

Thus the three Sanaes reached a consensus. Even if they used the same methods Sanae-nee had in another world, there was no guarantee they would achieve the same results. Nothing in life was

certain, yet they couldn't afford to give up. And so they began training for next summer's beach trip.









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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 38

by Takehaya

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